Time, Fault and Out

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Time, Fault and Out

by ShenLong

Summary

Set 2 years after Equinity. Heero is now riding for the Khushrenada stable as well as attempting to qualify Zero for the Nations Cup team and ultimately his dream of riding at the Olympic games. But life is never an easy ride.
Chapter 1

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Rating: NC 17

Pairings: 1x2x1, 3x4

Warnings: AU, OOC, Lemon, Yaoi, Angst, Fluff, Sap, Vet themes.

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Notes: All the information on showjumping, horses, etc is taken from my own knowledge of the sport having been a competitor and now judge for many years and is written from an Australian perspective. The rules and regulations are courtesy of the E.F.A Handbook. (Equestrian Federation of Australia) Should you have any questions just e-mail me.

Fic 2 in the "Equine Intervention" Arc.

Dedication: To Klingonpoodle who gave me the plot bunny for the first fic and has since supplied my muse with its own plot bunny farm, and to 'Teddy Bear' my own courageous little showjumper whom Zero is based upon.

"Time, Fault and Out"

November. 2005 ShenLong

Chapter 1

"Good, that was much better. Now bring him round again and see if you can't get two strides in there instead of three."

Heero sat down into his saddle and collected the horse, riding him forwards but holding the energy with his hands. He turned and lined up the double, judging the striding and calculating exactly where he would need to give the horse rein to lengthen stride. They had been out in the paddock for an hour now, working with one of Treize's youngsters.

"Steady," muttered Heero as the horse began to leap forwards, pulling hard and eager to jump. The horse he was riding, a liver chestnut called Taurus, was one of five Heero was currently riding and schooling for and with, Treize.

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The horse continued to fight for its head, body bouncing full of energy as it fought against the human holding it in check. While Taurus was an eager and bold jumper with heaps of potential, he needed to learn to listen to his rider. He wasn't a mean horse, just impatient, occasionally skittish with a tendency to ignore his rider. Heero had been working on getting the horse to listen to his aids and respond to them, despite simply wanting to tear at the fences. To let the horse go around a jumping course at his current level of training would only prove detrimental to both animal and rider. Taurus
had a habit of seeing a jump and simply wanting to jump it without any thought for anything else; and that was dangerous.

Heero had been working him over a series of low fences in an attempt to get the animal to listen to his aids, teaching the horse when to lengthen and shorten stride. Slowly the work seemed to be paying off and Taurus was beginning to give a little and take note of what his rider was asking. Lining the double up again, Heero gave a little rein, letting the horse lengthen out a touch as he bore down on the fence. The jump had been set so the horse could take off over the first element, land, and according to his rider's instructions, take either two long strides or three short ones before jumping the second element. It was a good schooling fence and one certain to have a horse listening to its rider - eventually.

"Not quite so fast!" cried Treize as he watched the youngster fighting for his head. "Drop your weight a little more and bring him back together."

Heero tried to do as Treize instructed but it wasn't easy. The chestnut didn't want to listen and bucked in resentment of being restrained. Heero managed to sit the buck but found himself unable to check the horse's speed and in that instant, Taurus snatched the reins and tore at the fence. All Heero could do was hang on and try to go with the movement.

Taurus gathered his haunches underneath him and launched himself into the air. He cleared the first element, pecked a little on landing and came in awkwardly to the second. With a grunt, the horse put in a short stride and leapt into the air. Unfortunately most of his energy had been spent on fighting his rider and now when he needed it to clear the obstacle, he was sadly lacking. Forelegs brushed the top pole causing it to rock slightly and then the hind legs caught against it and sent it flying.

As the horse landed so Heero had recovered enough of his position to sit down hard in his saddle and gather up the contact with the horse's mouth. Somehow he managed to bring the animal to a walk and then halt, running a soothing hand along the sweat soaked neck. "You idiot," he growled softly. "Too damn impatient, that's your problem." Heero looked up as his eye caught the movement of Treize coming his way. The man didn't look too happy.

"That horse is a menace," snapped Treize. "I'm seriously beginning to think a bullet is the only cure for him."

"He's not mean or vicious," replied Heero in the horse's defense.

"He might as well be," muttered Treize. "He's damn dangerous. I thought at first it was just simple eagerness, now I'm beginning to wonder if he has a brain in his head at all."

"Give him a chance," replied Heero. "He's got tremendous scope and tons of ability."

"All of which are useless if he's not going to be trainable. No matter how well he can jump it's no good if he's not going to listen to his rider."

Heero knew that what Treize was saying was right, regardless of how much promise a horse showed it was no good if it didn't listen and accept the rider's aids. To jump the demanding courses of top level competition a horse and rider needed to be finely tuned to each other, the rider knowing just what his mount was capable of giving and that mount being responsive to the slightest touch from its rider.

Treize sighed. "Spend another ten minutes with him on the flat, simple changes of gait and see if you can't get him to listen a little better, then bring him in. I'm going to saddle up Tall Geese and do some work on his turns."
"Okay." Heero collected his reins and turned the horse away from the fences and headed to a spot of flat ground to practice transitions.

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"There you are, Fluffy," Duo said softly to the large, fluffy ginger cat as he rubbed the ruff of the animal's neck. "All done, Mrs. Jones. His next booster will be in a year's time."

"Thank you, Dr. Maxwell," replied the middle aged woman as she picked up her cat and placed him into the carry cage. "Will you send me out a reminder?"

"Yes, we will," said Duo as he opened the door and took the cat cage from the woman. "I'll carry Fluffy out for you."

Back in the reception room, Duo sat the cat cage down and went behind the reception desk. He quickly wrote down the details of the visit onto the cat's file, took the payment from the client and gave her a receipt. Once the woman left he locked the door behind her and gave a sigh of relief.

Morning consults were over and he was in desperate need of a coffee. Unfortunately the coffee would have to wait until he'd finished inputting all the morning's clients and payments into the computer. Running a hand across his chin, Duo eyed the computer.

The computer glowed innocently back.

Heero had shown him on numerous occasions exactly how to enter all the data, even going so far as to write it all down for him, and Duo followed the instructions to the letter. For some reason though, he always seemed to mess it up. "Right, Nrobbuts," Duo growled, "this time you will do it right."

Picking up the first of the client files, Duo consulted the piece of paper with the instructions on and began to enter the data.

Ten minutes later Duo was certain the computer was laughing at him.

"I don't fucking believe it," he snarled and thumped his hand down on the desk. "You sneaky, underhanded piece of outdated circuits. What the fuck have you done now?"

"Problems, Duo?"

Duo whirled around to see Hilde leaning against the door frame, an amused look on her face. "It's this piece of fucking shit, I swear it's a new form of torture device masquerading as a bunch of wires and chips. I thought computers were supposed to make your life easier?"

"They do, if used correctly," replied Hilde. "A computer can't make mistakes, they only respond to what's programmed into them."

"In other words, you're saying I'm a moron?"

"Errr... No."

"I don't know why I ever bothered to buy this piece of junk. I was doing fine with the filing system and good old ledger book," muttered Duo as he tried again to enter the data. "Now what the hell have you done with it? Eaten it, I suppose."

Hilde chuckled and shoved off the door frame. "Here, let me do it," she said and gently pushed Duo from the chair.

Duo removed himself from the chair and gave the other vet a warm smile. "You sure you don't
"Nah, I've got a few minutes before the autoclave is finished and afternoon surgery isn't for another hour yet. Besides, you look like you need the break."

"That bad, huh?" replied Duo as he rubbed his tired eyes.

"Yeah. If those dark circles get any darker I'd say Heero had punched you. Rough night?"

"You could say that. I was called out to a calving at two this morning; breech presentation. Took me two hours to deliver the thing but it was worth it." Duo's mind wandered back to the early hours of that morning. The cow had been a Jersey, one of Duo's favorite breeds of cow. They were small, doe eyed creatures that were generally easy to deal with, unlike the larger Freisians that were the usual breed of cattle in the district. This cow had been special, she was the farmer's house cow and her rich milk found its way to the farm table in the form of cream, milk, butter and occasionally cheese. Although the farmer would never have admitted to having a soft spot for a cow, Duo could sense it in the manner the farmer displayed around the creature, and the fact that she had a name; Butterscotch.

Two hours of struggling, stripped bare to his waist in the cold cow house had eventually succeeded in the birth of a bull calf, and a fairly large one at that. The farmer had been overjoyed, Duo was similarly pleased. He'd managed to deliver a healthy calf and saved the mother from the butcher. Unfortunately by the time he'd returned home it was five in the morning. He'd crawled back into bed, bone weary and cold only to have Heero snuggle up to him. Sometimes it was worth getting out of bed to come back to this, Duo had thought as Heero's body heat began to sink into his freezing form and slowly thaw him out. As Duo had begun to drift off so the alarm had gone off and jolted him awake again. He'd groaned and dived under the pillow while Heero had shut the damn thing off and apologized for disturbing his lover. Duo accepted the apology, along with several warm kisses before Heero had left their bed to prepare for the day ahead.

The routine was the same, Heero would get up, dress and then go out to put Zero, Scythe and Shinigami into their respective paddocks before feeding them. The stables would be the next stop, Heero mucking out all three and emptying the water buckets. With those chores done, Heero would leave the water buckets for Duo to fill and put back in the stables later, along with the horses' night feeds. Three haynets were filled and left for the horses' lunch before Heero returned to the house and made himself and Duo a cup of tea. The tea would be taken through to the bedroom, another few kisses shared and then Heero would shower, have his breakfast and leave for Treize's stables, returning around three in the afternoon to work Zero and give Duo a hand with evening consults.

It was a routine they had gotten into and it worked so far. Well, sort of. With Heero now spending more time at Treize's it seriously cut into the amount of time the accountant had left to see to the business side of the veterinary practice. Heero tried to keep up with the accounts and putting all the data into the computer, but some days it simply got away from him. Duo had finished a consult one evening and upon returning to the reception area with the client, had found Heero face down on the keyboard and snoring softly. That's when Duo had made his stand and informed Heero that Hilde and himself were capable of entering the client data into the computer and all Heero would have to do would be to check over the accounts at the end of each week and make sure that the computer records matched the receipt book and bank slips. After a few arguments, Heero had reluctantly agreed.

Duo wished it was that simple.

With Heero having done the accounts and computer work for so long now, Duo had forgotten just how much Nrobbuts delighted in tormenting him. That fact had now been brought back to him with
startling clarity these past few days. Duo couldn't figure out why everyone else could manage the
damn thing while he had nothing but trouble with it. It continuously 'ate' the information or hid it
deep in its chips where Duo would never find it. He swore the thing was alive and had a serious
vendetta against him.

"All done." Hilde's words broke the silence that had settled.

Duo gazed at the screen where all the information on the morning's consults was displayed, seeming
to mock him and his incompetence. "Thanks, Hilde."

"No problem. Why don't you go grab a bite to eat and see if you can't get forty winks. There's only a
couple of cat spays for surgery and I can handle those by myself."

"Are you sure?" Duo had to admit, the thought of snatching a few z's was rather appealing.

"Of course I'm sure," Hilde snorted. "Go, shoo. If anything serious comes in I'll page you."

"Thanks." Duo gave the other vet a smile and then removed his white coat, hanging it on the back of
the consulting room door before leaving the small surgery and walking down the connecting path to
the house.

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Heero let the horse stretch out his neck as they walked back from the schooling paddock to the stable
block. Sweat was drying on the animal's neck and Heero felt his own skin prickling from the dust
and sweat covering his body. Entering the stable yard, Heero turned Taurus to the left and brought
him to a halt in front of his stable. A few doors down, Treize was checking Tall Geese's jumping
boots. Heero dismounted, feeling an ache in his arms and shoulders and proceeded to unsaddle the
chestnut. A groom came out from the tack room and gave him a hand and once the horse was
untacked, the groom took over, taking the horse into the wash bay area and washing the sweat from
the horse's coat.

Heero walked over to where Treize was checking his girth when a high pitched whinny cut through
the air. Heero chuckled. "Sounds like someone's not happy about having their companion taken
away."

As if to agree, Tall Geese let fly with a loud, answering neigh of his own.

"It's beginning to drive me up the wall," muttered Treize. "I can't take the damn horse anywhere
without the squirt. If I leave him behind, Goose won't jump."

Heero couldn't help but laugh. Tall Geese was an impressive horse, standing seventeen hands, and in
Duo's terms, 'built like a brick shit house'. The horse had one undoing though; he wouldn't go
anywhere or do anything without his stable companion. The pair had been born around the same
time, a week separating them and when it had come time to wean them from their mothers, the two
had been turned out together and immediately formed a bond that refused to be broken. Tall Geese
was an exceptional jumper, the ability he was showing put him in Olympic contention; but if his
companion wasn't with him, Goose wouldn't jump a stick.

It was quite comical and Heero had found himself doubled over with laughter the first time he'd seen
the pair and refused to believe the stories about the two. Never were two horses more opposite each
other. While Goose stood tall, his companion was a miniature pony, lucky to reach forty eight inches
in height; but what he lacked in height he more than made up for in personality. 'A barrel with legs'
was what Heero had dubbed the mini horse. But when he learnt the pony's name, it sent him into
further hysterics.

Short Duck.

Heero supposed it made sense, the two animals being such complete opposites.

"Can you let Duck out? I'll go on ahead to the schooling paddock, he'll find us," said Treize as he swung himself into the saddle.

"Sure," replied Heero. "Would you like me to work on Sandrock next?"

"That would be good. Take him over the grids, he needs to work more on his stamina."

"Right." Heero turned and headed for the paddock where the mini pony waited, pawing at the ground in impatience. "Okay, short stuff, hold your horses," Heero chastised gently as he undid the gate latch. No sooner had he gotten the gate open than Duck barreled through and set off for the schooling paddock and his friend at a brisk trot. Heero shook his head as he watched the fat rump disappear around the corner.

* * *

It was three o'clock when Heero found himself pulling into the familiar driveway. He passed the small surgery car park, noting Hilde's car parked there and drove on to pull up at the rear of the house. Getting out, Heero shut and locked the car door, cast an eye over the paddocks and grazing horses before walking towards the back door of the home he shared with Duo. Toeing off his boots and wriggling his toes, Heero stepped inside and looked around for his long haired lover. The house was quiet which usually meant Duo was up at the surgery.

With a sigh, Heero made a coffee then padded through to the lounge room, intending to sit and relax for a few minutes before going up to the surgery and finding the vet. Entering the lounge, Heero stopped in his tracks and smiled. Duo lay upon the couch fast asleep and snoring softly. Quietly, Heero made his way over and set his cup down on the coffee table, then he knelt on the floor beside his partner and proceeded to wake him up in the best way he knew how.

Heero feathered soft kisses along the side of Duo's face, over his cheek and along the jaw. He snickered softly as Duo wrinkled his nose and then buried his face deeper into the cushion he was using as a pillow. Once Duo was still again, Heero resumed his kisses, only this time he when he reached the edge of Duo's mouth a hand came up and caught him around the back of the neck, holding him firmly in place as his lips were seized in a sweet kiss. Opening his eyes wide, Heero was met by twinkling violet.

"Mmmm... Now that's what I call the perfect way to wake up," whispered Duo as he gave Heero another soft kiss.

When the kiss broke, Heero raised himself and joined his lover on the couch, lying flush against the lithe body of the vet and allowing his arms to enfold Duo within them. "Tired?"

"Yeah."

"What was the call out this morning?"

"Calving." Duo snuggled deeper into Heero's embrace and felt his lover wince a little. "You have a hard day?"

"Kind of. Taurus decided to see if he could pull my arms out of my sockets for me."
"Ahh. I think I may have just the cure for that."

"And that would be?" asked Heero as he placed a kiss to the top of Duo's head.

"A massage."

"Now that sounds really good. Can I get a rain check though? I have to go work Zero in a minute and then do some work with Shini."

"Sure. How about after dinner and your shower?" Duo nuzzled against Heero's neck

"Perfect. It's a date."

"Good, now cuddle me a little more before you go playing with the beasts."

Heero was only too happy to oblige.

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tbc....
"Good boy," said Heero as he patted the sleek, gray shoulder.

Shini gave a low wuffle and searched Heero's pockets for carrots. He was duly presented with a couple and munched happily, the bit in his mouth jingling as his jaws worked.

"He's certainly gotten his love of carrots from his old man," chuckled Duo as he watched Heero and the colt from the other side of the fence.

"As long as he's inherited Zero's love of jumping I don't care how many bags of carrots he eats," retorted Heero as he checked the mouthing gear again. Heero was beginning the preliminary stages of breaking Shinigami in. The colt was now two and had grown tremendously. He stood around fifteen hands at present and was filling out rapidly. With the new season of shows due to start soon, Heero knew the time he would have to spend on the colt and his basic education would be severely limited. Heero figured that if he could cover some of the basics now, then he could safely leave the colt for another year before settling into some serious breaking in once Shini was three. The colt was intelligent and it should only take a short refresher to reaffirm what Heero was teaching now.

"You know, I reckon he's going through another growth spurt," said Duo as he eyed the colt. "His rump is another good two inches higher than his wither."

Heero stepped back and took a good look. "I think you're right," he replied. "I'd say he could end up the same height as Zero when he's done growing."

"I'd guess about sixteen hands," said Duo thoughtfully as he sized up the horse's length of leg.

"Either way he will be a good height and broad through the chest. His hind end should be quite solid when he's finished growing."

"It will need to be," snickered Duo.

"And just what do you mean by that?" asked Heero, a mischievous glint in his eye as he stepped closer to the fence.

"With the future you have mapped out for him he's going to need all the strength he can get in those hind quarters."

"Just as long as you aren't insinuating anything about my weight."

Duo grinned. "Never said a word about it, but, I'm sure I can help you work off a few pounds if you think you're getting a little flabby." The words were accompanied by a sultry leer.

"I don't doubt that for a minute. However, I don't think it's me that needs the workout here." Heero let his gaze wander the length of his boyfriend's body then cocked his head.

"Why you..." Duo hopped over the fence and tackled Heero to the ground, Shini shied away from the wrestling humans, opting to watch their antics from a slightly safer distance.

"Is this a private groping session or can anyone join in?"

The pair on the ground froze and then Heero turned beet red while Duo jumped to his feet. "Quatre!"
I didn't hear you pull up."

"You were obviously preoccupied with other, shall we say, more interesting things?" replied the blonde with a smirk.

Duo hopped back over the fence and gave his friend a warm hug. Heero got to his feet a little slower, dusting off his pants as he approached the fence.

"Trowa's just coming. He stopped to say hello to Scythe," said Quatre as he shook hands with Heero over the fence.

"You mean stuff her with sugar," snickered Duo.

"That too," grinned Quatre.

Scythe had a sweet tooth; a very sweet tooth. She loved carrots just like Zero and Shini did but her secret passion was sugar cubes. It was quite funny to see Scythe with sugar, her eyes all but glazed over. Duo swore that sugar and Scythe's reaction to it was the closest thing the horse would probably ever experience to an orgasm. Quatre and Trowa had thought that hysterical. Heero didn't think it was all that funny.

"Ah, here he comes now," said Quatre as his eyes alighted on the lanky form of his own lover strolling towards them, a slightly shorter figure at his side.

Both Heero's and Duo's attention was drawn to the animal shelter proprietor and the person with him. Duo gave the blonde inspector a curious look.

"I know you only invited Trowa and myself to dinner, but we had an unexpected guest arrive on our doorstep and I hoped you wouldn't mind if we brought her with us. I would have called, but with one thing and another time just got away from me. We quite understand if it's not appropriate," Quatre began to apologize.

"Q-man, settle down," said Duo as he squeezed his friend's arm. "It's no problem at all. Heero made a beef hot pot for dinner so there's plenty to go around."

"Who is she?" Heero murmured under his breath.

"I'll let Trowa do the introductions in a second. I'll just let them know it's okay." The blonde left his friends and approached the pair.

Trowa and the mystery guest arrived at the paddock fence a few moments later and Trowa did the honors of introducing the woman. "Duo, Heero, I'd like you to meet my sister Catherine. Catherine, these are my dear friends, Duo and Heero," said Trowa as he indicated to the vet and the rider.

Catherine extended her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I've heard a lot about you both from Trowa; and Quatre too," she added hastily as she caught the Inspector's eye.

"Don't believe a word of it, we are innocent until proven guilty," quipped Duo as he took the woman's hand and kissed the back of it. "I'm Duo, the vet."

"And I'm Heero, the innocent party," deadpanned Heero as he shook the woman's hand.

Catherine gave a snort of laughter. "I can see I'm going to like you two."

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Sitting around the table enjoying the meal that Heero had prepared earlier, the conversation began to flow. The group discussed Quatre's current cases with the R.S.P.C.A and in particular one of neglect involving a dog which Duo had been called in on. Quatre was happy to report that the man had been taken to court and successfully prosecuted. A fine of five thousand dollars and a lifetime ban on ever keeping a pet again were the outcome. Duo was similarly pleased at the result.

"The dog has now been placed and when I checked on him last week he was looking really good," said Quatre. "I'd say the new owners will be bringing him in soon for you to check over as well, Duo."

"I'll look forward to it," replied Duo. "It's always nice to see the changes in those animals once they get a decent shot at life."

"It's amazing to see what good food and kind treatment can do for an animal," stated Catherine. "To look at some of the animals that come into Trowa's shelter... It's disgusting, and yet, give them a few weeks of good care and they are completely different."

"I agree," said Duo as he turned his attention to the young woman. "You work much with animals?"

Catherine faltered a little and looked to Trowa who nodded back. Placing her napkin on the table, Catherine turned to face the young vet and cleared her throat. "Yes, I suppose you could say I did. I don't know what Trowa has told you about our backgrounds..."

"He did say he was brought up in a circus," interrupted Duo, "but he's never spoken much about it." Duo turned to look at Trowa.

Quatre and Catherine also looked at Trowa who gazed steadily back at them. "It's okay, Cathy. I never really mentioned much about my past to Duo or Heero, it never really came up in the conversation. I don't have anything to hide and I'm not ashamed."

Heero looked quizzically from one to the other. "It's none of our business and if you don't want us to know then we don't have to. It's not going to change the friendship."

Trowa gave the rider a warm smile. "It's really quite boring."

Duo grinned. "I like boring."

Cathy shook her head and then began to speak. "In a nutshell Trowa and I were brought up in the circus. Our parents were performers, a high wire act and Trowa followed in their footsteps. I was more for the 'on the ground' acts and worked with the performing dogs and horses as well as assisting with the knife thrower. Our parents were killed in a high wire accident when we were both still under twelve and the rest of the troupe pretty much raised us. Trowa didn't do any further high wire acts, instead he helped me with the dogs and ponies, he also worked with me in the knife act. He had an uncanny ability with the animals though and soon he was working with the big cats."

Duo gave a low whistle. "Now that's what I call living dangerously. You couldn't have one of those sitting on your lap and kneading its claws."

Everyone laughed and it broke the mild tension that had begun to rise.

Cathy continued. "Once Trowa was old enough he moved away from the circus and set out to chase his dream, a dream of running his own animal shelter. He's succeeded in that dream and I am so proud of him." Cathy gave her brother a warm smile. "I decided to stay with the circus and would have still been there if not for the tragedy a few weeks ago."
"Tragedy?" questioned Heero.

Catherine's eyes watered a little as she became lost in her memories. "It was late one evening, the final act had come and gone, the crowd had left and everyone was settling down for the night. I'd only been asleep in my trailer for I guess, a couple of hours when I was woken by screaming and yelling. I jumped out of bed and grabbed a wrap; the air was thick with smoke and it was hard to breathe." The young woman stopped, unable to go on so Trowa took over for her.

"The police say the fire was deliberately lit but they haven't found enough evidence to lead them to the perpetrators of the crime. We have our suspicions but..."

Quatre lay his hand on top of Trowa's. He'd already heard the news when Catherine had turned up on their doorstep, lost, frightened and with nowhere else to go. He glanced at Duo and Heero to see how they were reacting to the news.

"Deliberately lit?" questioned Duo, his eyes wide.

"By the time the fire brigade arrived there wasn't much they could do. As you can appreciate, the place went up like a tinder box, there's a lot of combustible material associated with a circus," said Catherine with tears in her eyes.

"The entire place went up in smoke. Only the frame work of the big top and some of the animal cages were left at the end of it," added Trowa in a quiet voice.

"The people?" asked Heero in a hushed tone.

"The animals?" questioned Duo, his voice thick.

Trowa shook his head. "A couple of the performers died trying to save the animals; it was hopeless. The fire had taken hold and there was nothing they could do. They knew it was suicide to even try - but they did."

"Oh, Cathy, Trowa... I don't know what to say," said Duo, a lump in his throat.

"I'd like to find those bastards and string them up by the balls," growled Heero. "Pardon my language," he added in apology to Catherine.

Cathy smiled through her watery eyes. "Well, what's done is done and there isn't much I or any of the other performers can do about it. The investigation is still continuing but the police don't hold much hope."

"Can you rebuild? Start again?" asked Duo as he pushed the last of his food around his plate, his appetite gone.

"I wish we could, but, the boss was one of those who died in the fire. Oh, the circus was insured but the boss was the benefactor and he didn't leave a will."

"So the state will pretty much take everything," said Heero who was more conversant with the way the laws worked having been an accountant.

"Yes, that's the long and short of it. I didn't have anywhere else to go so I thought I would come and visit my brother, help him out for a bit while I try to sort my life out and figure out what to do and where to go from here." Cathy picked up her napkin and dabbed at her eyes. "So, that's the whole story of why I'm here visiting Trowa. Now, I believe you're an aspiring Olympic rider, Heero?" The woman swiftly changed the subject.
Duo had to admire the strength the woman showed. To watch your entire life go up in flames, lose everything that meant something to you and then have to start again completely from scratch was not going to be easy. The conversation continued around him but Duo only listened with half an ear, his mind was on those poor animals who had perished and the low lives that could do such a thing. He was jolted from his thoughts though when Heero dug him in the ribs. "Ow!"

"Duo, that's the intercom from the surgery, I think Hilde needs you," said Heero as he poked his lover.

"Ah, sorry." Duo got up and went through to the lounge where the intercom was based. The unit was making an insistent buzzing sound and Duo quickly hit the 'talk' button. "What's up, Hilde?"

* * *

Heero tried to listen in on what was happening in the lounge but wasn't very successful, the volume of conversation pretty much drowned out anything he could have heard. He looked up seconds later though when Duo appeared in the kitchen doorway, his face pale.

"I'm sorry guys, I have to dash up to the surgery. Hilde's had an emergency come in and needs my assistance." As Duo was explaining to his group of friends so he was also locating his shoes and putting them on.

"Need some help?" asked Heero as he began to stand.

"I should be fine," replied Duo as he looked pointedly at their guests.

Heero got the message and sat down again. "If you do need help, just buzz, okay?"

Duo nodded. "I apologize for having to dash off..."

"It's quite okay, Duo. We understand. Is there anything we can do to help?" asked Quatre.

"Nah. Thanks for the offer though. You guys finish off dinner, I may catch you before you go, depends on how long this consult takes."

"Would you mind if I... I mean, I don't want to impose or anything but I'm really interested in what you do and if it would be okay, could I come and watch?" asked Catherine.

Duo gave the girl a warm smile, his compassionate side coming through. In light of what she'd been through it might not be a good idea but then again, it might do the young girl a bit of good. "If you want to," he said. "Although I do warn you, it could be messy. Hilde didn't exactly say what the problem was, just an M.V.A."

"M.V.A.?" asked Catherine as he stood up.

"Motor vehicle accident," supplied Heero.

"Oh. I'd still like to come if I'm not going to be in the way. I'm used to blood and stuff, I did tend to the circus animals quite a lot when they..."

"Come on then," smiled Duo. "Let's go give Hilde a hand." Duo turned to the rest of the group. "Come on up by the surgery if we're not back by the time you're ready to leave."

"Will do," answered Trowa.

The vet disappeared with Trowa's sister in tow. Once they had gone the remaining three finished off
the last of their meal and then cleared the table. Trowa and Quatre insisted on doing the dishes; Heero didn't object. Once the kitchen was tidy they sat down again with a mug of coffee each and let their dinner settle.

"I'd better go and bring the nags in and give them their dinner," said Heero as he drained his mug and looked at the clock.

"We'll give you a hand," said Quatre as he also finished his coffee and stood up, picking up Trowa's empty mug and taking the two over to the sink.

"We will?" questioned Trowa who was quite comfortable in his chair and had even begun to doze off.

"Yes, we will," repeated Quatre and gave his boyfriend a stern look.

Trowa shrugged his shoulders and stood up, following the other two out of the kitchen and to the stables.

* * *

Duo's mind was running overtime as he entered the back door of the vet practice. Quickly he strode down the hall and into the consulting room, Catherine following close behind. "What's the problem, Hilde?" he asked as his eyes took in the cardboard box sitting on the examination table.

"Mrs. Marx just brought her cat in, Duo. She's out in the waiting room, I thought it best if she wasn't in here while we look at the cat. She said she'd just let Blackie out for a run when she heard the screech of brakes. She ran outside but it was too late, the car had sped off and Blackie was lying on the side of the road, and, well... You take a look and see what you think." Hilde turned and for the first time spotted Catherine standing behind Duo just in the doorway. "Hello, who are you?" she asked with a forced smile. Whatever lay in that box had visibly shaken the female vet.

"Sorry, I'm forgetting my manners. Hilde, this is Catherine, Trowa's sister. Catherine, this is Hilde my assistant vet in the practice and good friend. Catherine is visiting Trowa at the moment and when I got your call to come up and see this emergency she asked if she could come and help."

"Nice to meet you," said Hilde as she offered her hand and shook the other woman's.

"Nice to meet you too, Hilde."

"You may change your mind about helping once you see what the damage is," said Hilde in a low voice. "It isn't pretty and no one will think any less of you if you want to pull out."

"I'll be fine," replied Catherine with a steely determination. "I like animals and I've worked with them before."

"We'll see," muttered Hilde and turned her attention back to the table and Duo who was now lifting the small creature from inside the box with gentle hands. Hilde wasn't being rude, simply stating the facts. She'd had more than enough experience with people over the years of her practicing. They were willing enough to help but usually found the blood and guts all a bit too much and on several occasions Hilde had found herself deserted by her 'help', said help either running for the toilet or flat out on the floor in a dead faint.

Duo gently lay the injured cat on the examination table and began to check over the mangled body. "Fucking hell," he swore softly as he prodded around.
The cat turned its head slightly and tried to meow. A rusty sound came from its mouth, along with blood, foam and saliva.

"Jesus Christ!" It was all Duo could do to hold onto his dinner and he was used to seeing some pretty grotesque things. "Hilde, give me a shot of Nembutal, now!" [1]

Hilde reached for the anesthetic bottle and drew out a few cc's into a syringe. Wordlessly she passed the needle to Duo who injected the animal. Blackie began to slump as the anesthetic coursed through his blood stream, releasing him from his world of pain for a short while at least.

With the cat now sleeping peacefully, Duo was able to conduct his examination more thoroughly and without fear of hurting the cat any further. His lips were set into a grim line, his skin pale as he took in the condition of the little animal.

Catherine inched closer and saw the full extent of the cat's injuries. Her hand flew to her mouth, not to stop the gag reflex as Hilde had thought, but to stop the string of curses that wanted to come out as her shocked eyes took in the damage. "Can - can you help it?"

"I don't know," replied Duo honestly. There's a couple of fractures to the right back leg and they should be easy enough to set, the scrapes are full of dirt and a few need stitching. Those aren't the problem; this is." Duo gently turned the cat over to expose the other side of its face, or rather what one would assume was its face.

The skin had been pulled back, literally peeled away from the skull, the glint of bone showing. That wasn't the worst though. The small, lower jaw was shattered, broken into at least three pieces and twisted around in such a manner that it didn't look like it was a part of the cat at all.

"That is where the problem lies. I can reattach the skin to the skull but it's that jaw. It will need very careful surgery, tiny pins and plates to reconstruct it and even if we are successful in sorting out the mess and reattaching the jaw, there's no guarantee that the jaw will function normally or that the cat will be able to eat again. Duo blew out a long breath and straightened up.

"What's the alternative?" asked Catherine.

"Euthanasia," said Hilde sadly as she ran a hand along what was once gleaming fur.

"You can't..." began Catherine.

"It's not up to us, Cathy," said Duo softly. "I'll need to speak with Mrs. Marx and let her know what the options are. It's her choice as it's her cat. We can operate and do our best, but this is micro surgery of sorts and it won't be cheap." Duo gave the girl's arm a squeeze and left the room to speak with the owner.

"It seems so sad," said Cathy as she watched the sleeping animal.

"I know," replied Hilde. The young girl had gone up several notches on Hilde's 'likable' meter, her obvious concern and lack of fainting or throwing up had gone a long way towards that. Hilde found she was starting to really like this woman.

Duo returned a few minutes later. "Scrub up, Hilde, we're going into surgery."

~ * ~

tbc....
Nembutal: Common name Pentobarbital. It's a drug used to treat insomnia in humans but also as a sedative in animals.
Chapter 3

"What did you tell Mrs. Marx?" Hilde asked Duo as they prepared to move the cat to the operating theater and get ready for surgery.

"The truth," replied Duo. "I explained the injuries and what would be involved in attempting to put the cat back together; without the gory details," he hastily added. "I gave her a rough estimate of the cost and also that there is no guarantee that the surgery will work. I explained that the chances that Blackie will recover are very slim but if she wished for us to try and save him we would do our best."

"Then we had better make sure we do our best," smiled Hilde. "It's going to be a challenge to put this jigsaw of a jaw back together but I'm willing to give it a shot."

"Would I be able to help with the surgery in any way?" asked Cathy who had been stroking the cat's fur.

Duo studied the girl intently. "I was going to buzz Heero and ask him to come and assist, he usually acts as a vet nurse on occasions like this, but..." Duo looked at Hilde and the other vet nodded. "If you're sure you can stomach it and put up with being ordered around by Hilde and me, then I have no objection."

"Thanks. I've done a little bit of animal nursing with the circus animals on the rare occasion one of them got sick so I'm familiar with some of the instruments and basic procedures," replied Cathy.

"Right. Let's get started then. Hilde, could you take Cathy through to the theater and find her some scrubs? I'll bring Blackie through. There should be clean instruments in the autoclave. Once you two are scrubbed you can set up the tray and prep Blackie while I get scrubbed and let Heero know what's happening."

"Will do, boss man," replied Hilde with a grin, then turning to the young woman she continued, "this way to the theater and all things surgical."

Catherine laughed and followed the female vet out of the consulting room and to the theater.

Duo went through to the reception area and turned the sign around to read 'closed'. Once that was done he locked the door and went to the intercom. Pushing the small button, he waited for Heero to acknowledge and answer but no reply came. Duo tried again, still no luck. He frowned and happened to glance at the clock on the wall. "Shit!" Duo smacked his hand against his head. "Of course, Heero will be bringing the horses in. Damn! Oh well, nothing I can do about it. I'll just have to wait until he comes up here," Duo said out loud to himself. With the thoughts of the cat and the time he was going to be spending in surgery, Duo headed back to the consulting room to take the patient through to the theater.

***

Heero opened the large, sliding door to the stable block and stepped inside. Trowa and Quatre were right behind him. Walking over to Zero's stable, Heero went inside to check that the horse's feed was in the feed bin. It was and Heero smiled to himself.

"What can we do to help, Heero?" Quatre asked as he leaned over the stable door.
"Duo's put all the feeds in and the water buckets are full so we can go fetch the horses in from the paddocks," replied Heero as he stepped out of the stable.

"Can I lead Scythe?"

"Of course you can. Would you like to lead Shini? Or would you prefer Zero, Trowa?" Heero asked as the three set out for the paddocks and the waiting horses.

"I'll take Shini if that's okay," replied Trowa.

"That's fine. Just watch him though, he leads all right but he can get a little pushy and try to drag you along. If he does that just give him a sharp tug on the lead rope and growl at him," Heero advised.

"Okay," said Trowa.

Quatre found Scythe waiting at the gate and easily clipped the lead rope to her halter. The mare stood patiently while Quatre opened the gate and then followed happily at the blonde's side as she was led to the stables for her dinner.

Zero watched the mare's tail as it disappeared along the path back to the stables and he gave an impatient whinny. Heero clipped the lead rope on and brought him out of the paddock. He waited for Trowa who had managed to catch Shini okay and was now persuading the colt to lead quietly by his side. Unfortunately Shini didn't want to listen.

Trowa knew that animals could sense when you didn't have a lot of experience with them, and Trowa was sadly lacking in the equine department. Dogs and cats were more his line. Consequently Shini was snatching at the lead rope and trying to bulldoze his way through Trowa in an attempt to get to his dinner quicker.

"Give him a sharp tug and growl at him," repeated Heero as he watched the little drama playing out. Shini was a smart animal and had figured Trowa out in two seconds flat.

Trowa pulled sharply on the lead rope as Heero had told him. "Behave yourself," he chastised.

Shini gave a snort and nearly knocked Trowa flat on his back.

"I said growl at him, not whisper sweet nothings to him," said Heero as he tried to hide his amusement.

"I was growling at him," huffed Trowa. "Quit it!" he snapped to the colt as if trying to show Heero he was reprimanding the colt.

Shini didn't take any notice.

"I'm not the one you have to convince," said Heero calmly. "He is, and if you're not more forceful, he's going to walk all over you. You have to show him who's boss."

"I don't want to hurt him," defended Trowa.

Heero resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Trust me, Trowa, you won't hurt him. Look at the size and strength difference."

"You do have a point."

"My money's on Shini," snickered Heero.
"Thanks a lot, Hee... OW! FUCK! Why you son of a bitch!" Trowa's demeanor suddenly changed as the colt snuck forward and nipped him on the arm. "Bite me, would you?!" Trowa gave the colt a resounding smack to the neck and a sharp tug on the lead rope. "You will behave and you will walk quietly to the stables and if you bite me again I will personally bite you BACK!" Trowa growled out fiercely.

Shini ducked his head and looked meekly at Trowa.

"Good. That's much better. Now, let's proceed." Trowa took a firm hold on the lead rope and began to march towards the stable block with as much dignity as he could muster; Shini walked docilely beside him as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

Heero followed behind, a smirk tugging at his lips. "I guess there's hope for Trowa yet. What do you think, Zero?"

Zero gave his master a nudge in the ribs.

* * *

There was no happy bantering in the theater of the small veterinary practice, just the tinkling of instruments as they were dropped into trays, a soft grunt and occasional order barked out. Hilde swabbed at a wound, cleaning the grit and grime of the asphalt from inside before flooding the area with a saline wash and then dabbing it dry.

"Sutures."

Catherine was proving to be an asset to the two vets as they worked, anticipating some of the instruments they needed before they asked and having them ready. It wasn't easy to keep her emotions under control as she watched those nimble fingers at work. Hilde was suturing the scrapes and cuts the cat had sustained before setting the broken legs in plaster. Duo had taken the more intricate surgery and was busy at the cat's head.

"You almost finished back there, Hilde?" asked Duo as he wiped the sweat from his forehead onto the back of his sleeve.

"Yeah. Putting the last plaster bandage on now," came the reply.

"Good. I'm going to need your help up here in a moment."

"Be right with you." Hilde finished applying the last of the bandages and then removing her gloves, she went to wash up again before donning a fresh pair that Catherine had ready for her. "Thanks," she said to the young girl as she pulled the latex gloves on. Hilde also placed a pair of magnifying glasses onto her head, similar to the ones Duo wore. They would need them for the intricate surgery ahead.

"This is the tricky bit," said Duo as he shifted slightly to let Hilde get in beside him. "I've cleaned up all the area and reattached the skin to the skull. Now it's a case of getting this jaw back together."

Hilde looked closely at the cat's face. Duo had done an excellent job so far. The broken pieces of jaw were cleaned up and it was clear to see where they needed to be pinned and plated. "Have you got plates small enough?" asked Hilde as she studied the minute fragments of bone they would be working with.

"Yeah, I do. I have a stock of small stuff I ordered in when I first opened the practice. Never thought I would ever use it though."
"Then thank heavens you have a tendency to be a boy scout."

"Huh?"

"Always prepared," snickered Hilde.

Duo gave her a friendly poke to the ribs. "I'll get the plates and pins, could you fetch the small drill?"

The two vets collected the items they would need and set them out on a kidney dish. Catherine looked on in interest. The items were certainly tiny.

Duo gently poked around the cat's jaw with a pair of forceps. "I think we should put a pin in here then a plate on this bit here. Another plate on this part with a couple of pins should secure that. A couple of pins to this part and the whole thing should be back together."

"Sounds good to me," responded Hilde as she watched intently.

"Then all we have to do is secure the muscles, tendons and ligaments, stitch up the skin and the rest is up to Blackie."

"Then let's get started," said Hilde as she tugged the glasses down and activated the light atop of them.

Catherine took up position by the instrument tray and the two vets swung into action.

* * *

Heero finished doing up the leg straps on Zero's rug and then checked that the rug was sitting neatly in place. With a pat to Zero's rump, Heero exited the gray's stable and bolted the door.

"Damn friggin' thing!"

Heero walked over to Scythe's stable where the cursing was coming from, and laughed.

"It's not funny, Heero," huffed Quatre from inside the stable where he was attempting to put the rug on Scythe. The mare had her face buried in the feed bin and couldn't give a hoot about anything else other than her dinner. Quatre had had three goes now at getting the rug on the horse. And still hadn't succeeded.

The first attempt had seen the rug go on back to front. Quatre hadn't checked which way the rug was folded when he'd picked it up and gone to put it on. He'd dragged it back off and tried again. This time he'd tossed it over Scythe's back with such force that it kept on going and slid off the other side. Picking it up and dusting the shavings [1] from the lining, he'd tried again. He'd managed to get the rug on the mare's back in a sort of fashion but the buckles from the leg straps had swung around and hit him in the shins; hence the language.

"Want a hand?" asked Heero.

"It wouldn't go astray," replied Quatre as he rubbed his bruised shins.

Heero let himself into the stable and quickly had the rug straight on the mare's back. The leg straps were passed between Scythe's hind legs and clipped up, the chest strap was buckled a moment later and then Heero checked that the rug was sitting snug and not likely to rub.

"You make it look so easy," sighed Quatre.
"I've had a lot of practice," replied Heero as they exited the mare's stable.

"Who's been practicing?" asked Trowa as he came out of Shini's stable and bolted the door the behind him. Heero leaned over the door to run a practiced eye over the colt and his rug, satisfied with the job Trowa had done.

"Just talking about how easy and naturally it seems to be for Heero when handling these equines and all the stuff that goes with them." Quatre sat down on an upturned bucket to roll up his trouser leg and check out the damage. A large bruise was appearing on his shin.

"I'll put some ice on that when we get back up to the house," offered Heero as he studied the bruise.

"Thanks, Heero."

Trowa looked at the bruise. "What happened?"

"Slight argument with the buckle on the leg strap," replied Quatre and then began to roll down the trouser leg. He looked up to see Trowa removing his shirt and checking a place on his biceps. Quatre's eyes widened when he saw the livid red mark. "You?" he asked.

"Minor altercation with Shinigami's teeth." There was the distinct pattern of teeth marks on Trowa's arm but fortunately the skin wasn't broken.

"I thought horses were herbivores, not carnivores."

"They are, but Shini is going through that 'I don't want to do as I'm told' stage and testing the limits," replied Heero as he looked at Trowa's arm and the bite mark. "I'll get you some ice for that too."

"A bit like a naughty toddler?" snickered Quatre.

"I guess you could say he's going through the terrible two's stage," replied Heero with a touch of sarcasm and roll of his eyes.

"If this is what he's like at the 'toddler' stage, you have my full sympathy when he reaches the 'rebellious teenager' level. Let me know when that happens," Trowa responded with amusement.

"Why?"

"So I can make sure I'm not around to witness it."

Heero snorted and shook his head. "I'm going to get the haynets."

* * *

"Drill."

The fine drill was passed over.

"Thanks. Hilde, hold these steady will you?" Duo handed over the forceps to Hilde who took them and kept the small jaw fragment they were clamped upon in place. The drill whined for a second and then fell silent. Duo repositioned and drilled again.

Catherine stepped forwards and took the drill from Duo's hand. With her other hand she passed over another pair of forceps, these ones were clamped onto a tiny plate. Setting the drill down she quickly picked up a tiny screw and held it in the forceps ready for the vet.
They had been in theater for two hours. The strain was beginning to show in tired faces and cramped muscles. Duo blew a bead of sweat from the tip of his nose and then smiled as Catherine wiped his brow with a cloth. "Thanks."

Hilde took the forceps and tiny screw from Catherine and poised the screw over the plate. Duo positioned the plate along the tiny jaw fragments and lined up the holes he'd drilled earlier on the plate with the holes he'd just drilled into the jaw. "Nice and easy now," he muttered as he took the forceps and tiny screw from Hilde and began to put it into place. The process was repeated again along with a couple of pins and finally the cat's jaw began to look like a jaw again.

"Now to attach it back to the skull," breathed Duo.

A few minutes later, Duo was inserting the last pin into place. Dropping the forceps back into the tray he straightened his aching back for a moment. "Looks better than it did," he said with a grin.

"Would you like me to stitch up the muscles and tendons?" asked Hilde as she noted the weariness in Duo's stance.

"If you don't mind," replied Duo as he rubbed his weary eyes. "I'll do the skin when you're finished, I should be able to see straight again by that time."

"No problem," chuckled Hilde and set to work.

***

Heero, Quatre and Trowa had returned from putting the horses to bed and enjoyed another cup of coffee in the comfort of the lounge room. Heero's eyes kept drifting to the clock and he couldn't help thinking about how long Duo had been gone. His gaze drifted to the intercom but he decided against 'calling' the surgery just in case Duo couldn't answer. It was Trowa who broke into Heero's thoughts.

"We really should be going," he said quietly. "Would it be all right if we went up to the surgery and fetched Cathy?"

Heero looked over and registered the words. "I think we should go up there anyway and check on them all, they've been gone quite a while." Standing up, Heero collected the coffee mugs and took them out to the kitchen where he put them into the sink. He grabbed his old sneakers and slipped them on. Quatre and Trowa were waiting for him when he returned. "Let's go."

The three walked out of the house and along the path that connected the house to the surgery.

Duo was inserting the last stitch when Heero appeared in the doorway of the operating theater. He looked up as he finished tying off the tiny suture. "Hey," he said softly.

Heero smiled. "Looks like you've been busy."

Trowa and Quatre appeared in the doorway just behind Heero.

"That was good timing," said Duo. "We've just about finished." Duo turned to Hilde. "Could you set up a saline drip for me please? One of the ones with the extra attachment so we can administer antibiotics intravenously."

"Will do," replied Hilde and fetched the necessary equipment.

"I've come to pinch my sister back if you've finished with her," said Trowa with a smile.
Duo laughed. "Yeah, sorry about that, time sorta slipped away from us. She was a great help though." Duo turned to where the young woman was blushing with the praise. "Thanks, Catherine."

"It was my pleasure," replied Cathy. "I enjoyed being useful. You have a good set up here, Duo, and it was interesting to watch you work, both of you. I hope this cat pulls through all right." Cathy ran a hand over the sleeping animal.

"Well, we've done all we can, the rest is up to Blackie and Mother Nature now," replied Duo.

"I'll go settle him into a cat cage in the kennels," said Hilde as she slipped her hands underneath the anesthetized animal.

"I'll help," said Cathy and turned to her brother. "You don't mind waiting for another couple of minutes, do you?"

"Go ahead," replied Trowa and watched as his sister carried the drip apparatus and saline bag, following Hilde out of the theater. Once the two women were out of earshot, Trowa turned to Duo. "Thanks again for letting her help. It seems to have done her the world of good. She's been miserable since the circus accident, not only with the grief of the loss, but as you can appreciate her life was tied up in the game and now... well, she's sort of adrift in a sense. She doesn't know what she's going to do with herself, the circus was all she's ever known and done."

"Trowa, it was my pleasure to have her help. She was an asset and I know Hilde appreciated her being here as well." Duo gave the tall man's arm a squeeze.

"We'd better get going then," said Quatre as the two women returned. "Thanks again for dinner, it was lovely and I'll be in touch during the week, Duo."

"No problem. Look forward to it." Duo peeled off his gloves and shook hands with the blonde Inspector.

"See you later, Heero, thanks for dinner," said Trowa as he shook hands with the vet and accountant.

The goodbyes were repeated a few more times as everyone was thanked and shaken hands with. Finally there was only Duo, Heero and Hilde left in the small theater. Duo looked down at his blood stained scrubs and wrinkled his nose. Hilde wasn't much better. "Suppose we'd better get this lot cleaned up so you can go home and I can take a shower," said Duo as he began to collect the used instruments and dump them in the sink to wash before putting them into the autoclave.

Hilde began the task of scrubbing down the operating table while Heero emptied the rubbish and then swept and mopped the floor. It didn't take long before the theater was sparkling clean again.

"I'll check Blackie and give Mrs. Marx a ring to let her know how the cat is doing," said Duo and disappeared to the kennels.

Hilde went to get changed out of her scrubs and met up with Heero in the corridor. She quickly filled the rider in on what had happened while Duo was making his 'phone call. "I'll be off then," said Hilde as Duo reappeared.

"Okay, Hilde. See you tomorrow."

"You right to deal with the morning consults?" she asked as she paused at the door.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I'll give you a call and let you know how Blackie is in the morning," replied Duo.
"Thanks." Hilde closed the door after herself, Heero stepped up to lock it while Duo turned out the lights in the reception area.

"You look tired and stressed," said Heero softly as he stepped up behind Duo and placed his hands on his boyfriend's shoulders, massaging lightly.

Duo raised a hand and placed it over one of Heero's, leaning back and closing his eyes briefly as a soft moan escaped his mouth. "That feels good."

"Come on, I'm taking you back to the house so you can have a hot shower."

"Don't think I can stand up long enough," replied Duo wearily.

"I'll help you."

***

The hot water felt good against his aching muscles. Duo had his back to the spray, forehead resting on the glass screen of the shower while the hot water coursed down his back. The shower curtain rustled and Duo cracked open an eye.

"Got room in there for me?" Heero stood completely naked, waiting for permission to enter.

Duo smiled. "Always got room for you, Heero."

Stepping into the stall, Heero picked up the wash cloth and soap, lathering it in the cloth and then proceeding to wash Duo's back. He soaped over arms, shoulders and then Duo's lower back before crouching down and washing his lover's feet and starting a trek upwards over calves and thighs. Reaching Duo's buttocks, Heero gently spread the cheeks and soaped around. He discarded the cloth momentarily to run his fingers along the cleft and tease at the tight ring of muscle.

Duo's skin shivered at the gentle ministrations. When Heero's fingers began to tease lightly along his cleft and anal ring, he moaned. His nerves were sensitive and despite his exhausted state, his body began to respond. He could feel the heat intensifying between his legs and his hips shifted a little.

Heero picked up the wash cloth again and removed his fingers from Duo's rear end. Gently he turned the vet around and began to wash his front. He smiled as he noted the flushed state of Duo's skin and the way the braided man let his head fall back against the screen, giving Heero complete access to his body. He couldn't miss the half hard cock either. Heero began to run the wash cloth over Duo's chest, paying particular attention to those dusky nipples. Another moan told Heero his attentions were welcomed. The cloth moved down over the flat belly, skimmed around the groin and continued along the upper thigh. Next came the knees and then the shins and ankles before returning upwards and pausing for a moment then brushing over the inner thigh and to the patch of skin behind Duo's balls.

"Ahhh... Nice," groaned Duo.

With a soft chuckle, Heero ran the wash cloth over Duo's balls and then along the hardening shaft, pushing the foreskin back and cleaning around the ridge of the flared head. By the time he'd finished, Duo's cock was rock hard.

Heero's wasn't far behind.

Tossing the cloth to the floor of the shower stall, Heero took Duo's shaft in his hand and began to stroke, running his thumb over the swollen head from time to time and adding to his lover's pleasure.
His other hand moved between Duo's legs to cup the sac and roll Duo's balls in his hand.

Eyes closed and head tilted back to rest on the screen, Duo's mouth opened and soft pants came out as his body was stimulated. His hips began to move, thrusting up into the warm tunnel of Heero's hand as he was slowly drawn to completion. Nerves came alive, blood thundered in his ears and all weariness left him as he strove to reach his climax.

Heero continued to stroke, alternating the pressure and speed as Duo's body responded. He gently squeezed Duo's balls and then left them to rub against that sensitive patch of skin. He smiled as Duo's legs opened further to him, the body sliding down the glass screen a little as thighs parted. Heero managed to wriggle his finger further back and found that puckered entrance once more. This time he gently worked his finger inside, still keeping up a rhythmic stroking of Duo's cock and distracting the vet. Pushing forwards, inch by inch, Heero buried his finger completely in Duo's passage and then searched for that sweet spot.

"Nnnn," groaned Duo and then fell into a series of gargled moans as his world exploded in pleasure. His hips moved of their own volition, seeking further stimulus to bring him to his peak.

Pushing the finger in again, Heero's other hand sped up in its stroking, determined to bring his lover off. Duo's prostate was caressed again and Heero felt the body jerking against him as Duo reached his end. Thick, creamy seed erupted from the tiny slit, coating Heero's hand and being washed away by the water. Heero continued to stroke the softening organ, milking every last drop from his lover as he slipped his finger out.

As his orgasm tore through him so Duo was lost in a sea of roiling heat and pleasure. He shook and tingled to the tips of his toes with the intensity of it, feeling spasm after spasm pass though him. As the pleasure abated so he slumped against the screen, totally spent and tried to regain control of his breathing. He felt Heero's hand leave him and the wash cloth return to wipe away the last of the evidence that the water hadn't. Somehow he managed to crack open an eye and smiled. "Thanks," he breathed out.

"My pleasure," replied Heero as he began to wash himself.

Duo noticed that Heero was still sporting a hard on and licked his lips. Before Heero could register what was happening, Duo had sunk to his knees and taken the head of Heero's cock into his mouth.

"Ah, oh shit!" Heero cried out as he was suddenly enveloped in warm, wet heat; heat that sucked and teased him. He didn't get a chance to protest, that talented mouth and tongue were working their own magic on his cock and Heero closed his eyes. The wash cloth fell from nerveless fingers to land with a wet splat on the tiled floor; hands buried themselves in a wet, soggy braid and held the vet's mouth still as hips thrust and began to fuck the mouth that tormented and teased.

Duo let Heero use his mouth, he kept his teeth out of the way and breathed through his nose as best he could. He applied suction from time to time, hollowing his cheeks as he increased the pressure on the thick organ in his mouth. Occasionally he let his tongue roam along the pulsing vein, enjoying the whimpers that came from Heero's mouth as he stimulated his partner further.

It was heaven and it was hell; and Heero was lost to it all. Everything narrowed to his cock and that hot mouth. His hips thrust, eagerly seeking the orgasm that hovered just out of reach. He felt Duo's mouth increase the suction on him and then hands to his hips slowed his thrusting. He growled softly in frustration and then mewedled in delight as Duo swallowed him completely. When Duo began to hum around his shaft it triggered the end for Heero. He felt his balls tighten and then he plunged over the edge and into oblivion.
Thick seed shot down Duo's throat and the vet swallowed it all. As the rage of Heero's climax began to abate so Duo let the softening shaft slide free, licking up any stray drops from the slit. When he was satisfied that Heero wasn't going to give him anymore of the bitter sweet liquid, Duo pulled himself to his feet and grinned at his lover. Heero looked completely sated.

"That was intense," Heero managed to huff out as his breathing rate took its time to return to normal.

"Tasted pretty good too," snickered Duo as he licked his lips in appreciation.

Heero laughed and then crushed his lips to Duo's in an intense kiss. "You look like the cat that got the cream," he said softly.

"Yup, I'd say I got all of the cream," replied Duo with a grin.

"I think we had better get out of here before we start to prune," said Heero and turned the faucet off. They both stepped out of the stall and Heero grabbed the fluffy towels he'd placed nearby. Wrapping Duo up in one, Heero quickly toweled himself off and then gave Duo a hand. Another towel was pressed into service, wrapping around Duo's braid and absorbing as much water as possible.

Dry and naked, the pair stumbled along the hall and into Duo's bedroom where Heero had pulled the covers of the bed back before joining Duo in the shower. They tumbled into the bed, both exhausted from the day's events and their romp in the shower. Heero tugged the blankets up and then set his alarm clock. Flicking the switch to the bedside lamp, the room was plunged into darkness.

Duo snuggled down into the mattress and Heero's warmth. He wormed a hand over Heero's hip and then spooned up behind his lover. "Love you, Heero."

"Love you too, Duo. Goodnight."

"Night," came the sleepy reply.

Heero pressed back a little and smiled as he heard the breathing even out and the gentle snore from his partner. Moments later, he followed Duo into the land of nod.

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tbc....

[1] Shavings: These are the most common form of bedding used in horse stables here in Aussie, usually pine wood shavings as they are less dusty and very absorbent. They also stick like glue to the lining of rugs or your socks!
Despite his exhausted state, Duo spent a fairly sleepless night. He got up four times to check the monitoring system he had set up between the house and the surgery, checking that Blackie was okay. The cat was still sleeping, partially due to the anesthetic still in its system and partially due to nature. Duo wished he could catch a few z's himself. When the alarm clock finally went off, Duo dragged himself out of the bed, much to Heero's surprise.

"You didn't sleep too well," said Heero softly as he took in Duo's disheveled and tired appearance.

"I was worried about Blackie. Sorry if I disturbed you."

"You didn't; but you should have," responded Heero as he brushed his lips over Duo's in a morning kiss.

"No sense in both of us losing sleep." Duo kissed back and then moved to the dresser to fetch clean clothes.

"What happened? Blackie okay?" Heero pulled on a pair of well worn sweats.

"The monitors showed nothing unusual but I won't be completely satisfied until I check him out properly."

"I'll come with you."

Duo smiled.

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Duo gently pressed the stethoscope against the cat's chest, pleased when he heard the steady heart beat. He checked the casts on the back legs and then moved to the head. Blackie was starting to wake up and Duo stroked the animal's soft fur. "Hey, puss. How you doing?" The cat lifted its head a little and opened its mouth. A rather rusty meow was Duo's answer and the vet's eyes lit up, a wide grin plastered itself to his face as he turned to face Heero. "That's great," he said excitedly.

"I take it that Blackie is out of danger?" asked Heero as he watched his boyfriend at work.

"Strong heart beat, regular breathing and the temperature is just about normal. Face is swollen but that's to be expected. The best thing though, his jaw is working properly." Duo's face clearly showed the vet's relief.

"Good. I knew you wouldn't let the cat down." Heero wrapped his arms around Duo's waist and hugged his lover. "I'd better go put the horses out and feed them."

"Yeah. I'll go give Mrs. Marx a call and let her know how Blackie is doing. He's still got a long way to go and we're not completely out of the woods yet, but we are definitely headed in the right direction." Duo stroked over the cat's back and was rewarded with a rumbling purr.

Heero released his lover and went to complete his morning chores, Duo disappeared into the reception area to make his 'phone call.

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During the course of the morning consults, Duo was constantly interrupted by the ringing of the 'phone. Usually he would field a few calls but for some reason he took more than usual today. He found it slightly irritating to say the least and on more than one occasion had left the answering machine to take the calls for him. Once the last client had passed through the door, Duo locked it and turned the sign around to 'closed' with a relieved sigh. Walking back into the reception area he began the task of returning the calls he'd missed.

With the calls dealt with, Duo eyed the computer. "Right, Nrobbuts, it's just you and me," he muttered as he booted up the computer and faced off with the innocent looking screen. Half an hour later, Duo hit the enter button and then stared in disbelief at the machine. "I don't believe it. I don't fucking believe it!" he cried out as a wide grin spread over his face.

"What don't you believe?"

"Shit! Hilde, don't do that, you nearly gave me a heart attack!" Duo spun around in the chair, his heart racing as he faced the other vet who smiled at him.

"Sorry," said Hilde as she pushed off the door frame. "What are you disbelieving now?" she asked as she walked over.

"This," said Duo as he gestured to the computer.

Hilde stopped and looked at the computer. "Well, bugger me."

"No thanks, I've got Heero."

Hilde gave her boss a condescending look. Duo threw his hands up in the air in surrender, a wide grin on his face and mischief in his eyes. "You offered," he said with a smirk.

"What did you do?" she asked as she returned her attention to the computer and ignored the comment.

"Dunno. I just followed the instructions again, like I always do, but for some reason it all worked." Duo positively beamed as he looked at the computer screen and the data all neatly displayed on it. For once he'd managed to input all the client files and morning's work onto the data base and not lost a thing. It was all there in black and white. Duo felt like cheering.

Hilde looked amazed, although she'd never been able to understand why Duo had so many problems with the thing in the first place. The man was a brilliant vet but for some reason he couldn't seem to get the hang of simple electronics.

"I feel like I could kiss it," said Duo, his face smug with success at last.

"I wouldn't recommend it, you might fry its circuits," snorted Hilde.

Duo laughed.

"I expect you to be able to repeat this from now on, you know."

Duo's face fell and he abruptly changed the subject. "I need to check on Blackie, you coming?"

Hilde snickered as she followed her boss to the kennels.

***

Heero's arms ached, his fingers were sore and despite the gloves he wore he knew he had blisters
"Take it easy, you idiot," he growled softly to the horse beneath him. Taurus bucked and fought for his head. Heero sat down hard in his saddle and used his seat and legs to drive the animal together. He held a firm contact with the animal's mouth as he guided the horse to the start of the small jumping course.

Seeing the first jump looming ahead of them, Taurus began to pull harder, fighting for his head and eager to jump. Heero held him in check until the last possible moment and then let the reins slip a little through his fingers as he followed the forward movement of the horse with his body. Taurus bounded forth and leapt over the jump with inches to spare. Landing on the other side, the horse was frustrated to find his rider preventing his planned surge forward and so instead of galloping away to the next fence he was forced to slow his pace.

"No you don't, you swine," muttered Heero as he took up a firmer contact with his reins and slowed the animal's pace. "Steady, boy. Take it easy, this isn't competition yet, you know." Heero brought the horse around and set him up for the second fence. The second obstacle was cleared in much the same fashion as the first and Heero was once again tested to his limits in bringing the horse back under control before lining up the third fence.

The war between horse and rider continued over the next two fences, Heero determined to keep Taurus at a steady pace while the horse was equally determined to fight for its head and tackle the jumps in its own way. The double loomed before them, Heero concentrating hard on bringing Taurus in on the correct stride. There were only two strides in-between the two fences so it was important that Taurus take off and land correctly over the first element if he was to have any chance of clearing the second element.

They took off over the first part, landed safely and within two strides, Taurus was propelling himself through the air over the second element. Heero was hard pressed to stay with him, the huge leap the horse put in over the second obstacle almost unseated him. Realizing his rider was slightly off balance, Taurus snatched the reins and made a dash for the next fence. Unable to do much other than try to rebalance himself, Heero pushed his weight back into the saddle and then attempted to bring the horse back under control; no easy task when Taurus was determined to fight for his freedom.

Being left with no alternative, Heero crossed his reins over the horse's neck, forming a 'bridge' with them and then proceeded to work that 'bridge' down the animal's neck. It was an old trick that riders used with a horse that pulled. Jockeys tended to use it the most when riding the racehorses to the starting gate but it came in very handy in the other equestrian sectors. With the 'bridge' working its way down the horse's neck the animal was in effect fighting against itself. The further down the neck the bridged reins went the more the pressure was applied to the bit in the horse's mouth. The horse would have no choice but to flex its jaw and yield to the pressure, bringing its head lower and back towards the chest, thus slowing the pace.

Taurus soon found this out as the pressure increased in his mouth and he was forced to lower his head. He still fought though, stubbornly refusing to give in, even when his lower jaw was practically buried in his chest. Eventually he slowed and finally came to a walk, only then did Heero relax the reins and allow the horse to stretch out.

"I think that will be more than enough for you today," said Heero as he walked the animal around, cooling him off before taking him back to the stables. "You're a silly thing. You have lots of potential if only you would listen," Heero continued, speaking to the horse in a soothing manner. "Keep going the way you are and you'll never make it in the ring."

Taurus cocked back an ear and jogged a few steps. Suddenly he threw up his head and gave a snort. Heero looked over to the gate where Treize was leading Tall Geese through, the ever present
shadow, Short Duck, following right behind them. The mini pony found himself a patch of grass he seemed to like and planted himself there. There was no fear of him getting in the way while the horses were being worked, he simply grazed his way around the outside of the paddock. As long as he could see or smell his companion, he didn't care about anything else and would keep his muzzle buried in the grass.

Heero nicknamed him the 'Lawnmower on legs' much to Treize's amusement.

Having cooled off Taurus, Heero took him back to the stables and handed him over to one of the grooms to untack and brush down. Sandrock was waiting for him so Heero took a moment to grab a drink of water before mounting up and heading back out to the schooling paddock again. Sandrock and Taurus were the two horses Treize had given to him to school and bring on, hopefully taking them through the various grades until they reached International standard. The show season would be starting soon and Heero was looking forward to it. Both Taurus and Sandrock would be starting off in the D grade competitions and if they proved to be as good as Treize and Heero hoped, they should be at B grade by the end of the season. Heero had his doubts about Taurus, the animal was certainly hot headed and needed to calm down a lot more before he could be considered 'good'. Sandrock, on the other hand, was almost the complete opposite. The horse had a wonderful 'jump' on him but was inclined to be a bit on the lazy side. He was what Heero termed an economical jumper, only putting in enough effort to clear the jumps with millimeters to spare.

If Taurus could be calmed down enough he would be a formidable force in the speed events; but that would be a long way in the future. Heero sighed softly to himself and began to warm Sandrock up.

Treize had finished working Tall Geese and was walking the horse around to cool him off. He took the time to watch Heero and 'Sandy'. The young rider had caught Treize's eye when he'd spotted him and ridden against him a couple of seasons ago. The man had the determination and drive, combined with skill and a natural understanding of his horse to enable him to go to the top of the equestrian ladder. Having done some research on the 'newcomer', Treize discovered enough to know that this was the young man he'd been searching for to take on as a riding student.

Treize had a large stable of horses all at various stages of their careers. There were too many for him to work and keep in show condition, not to mention compete on as well, so Treize often had promising young riders working for him. The pupils learnt a great deal from Treize and in return, Treize got his horses schooled and jumped at the shows. As the animals progressed to the higher levels of competition and depending on the current rider's level of skill, Treize would either leave the horse in the rider's care for them to take on further or he would take over the horse himself. Many of his riders tended to leave though once they achieved A grade standard and went out on their own. It didn't bother Treize though as he was always on the look out for more riders with potential.

Treize had seen that potential in Heero; and in the horse he rode. Knowing that Heero had done all the work on the gray himself impressed the Olympic rider further, to the point where he knew he could help Heero attain his goal of International competition and benefit with his own string of showjumpers as well.

So far all had been working out quite well. Treize watched as Heero began to take Sandrock over some low schooling fences, adjusting the horse's stride where necessary. He was pleased to see the big animal listening and responding. The work Heero had put into the big bay over the past months was certainly paying off, pity the same didn't appear to be happening with Taurus.

Treize shook his head as he thought about the unruly chestnut. True, the horse did have a great jump on him with plenty of scope but none of that would be any good if the animal wouldn't obey its rider. Treize was no fool, he could see it was only Heero's skill that had managed to keep the horse
together so far; but what would happen if Taurus found himself with a less experienced rider on his back? Treize shoved that thought out of his mind. He had no intentions of selling the horse, he wouldn't even entertain the idea of putting his honest and reliable reputation at risk by selling an unruly animal. No, he'd rather put the horse down than risk having someone hurt. He was prepared though to give the horse a chance. As long as he thought Heero could control him, Treize would let Taurus continue his education.

Tall Geese gave a whicker through his nostrils bringing Treize back from his thoughts. He looked down to see Short Duck ambling over and smiled. Urging Tall Geese forwards, Treize rode over to be within shouting distance of Heero and 'Sandy' and proceeded to offer advice.

* * *

When Heero returned home that afternoon he found Duo humming away to himself as he folded the laundry. Leaving his boots at the back door, Heero wandered through the kitchen and along the hall to the bedroom, following the sounds of the humming until he located his boyfriend. "Hey," he said softly as he entered the bedroom and walked over to place his arms around Duo's waist.

Duo turned around in those arms and wrapped his own around Heero's shoulders. Duo tilted his head in invitation and was rewarded with a tender kiss. "How was your day?"

"Pretty much the same as usual. What about yours? How's the cat?"

Duo feathered kisses along Heero's jaw, taking in the scent of sweat and horse mingled with Heero's own musky, male odor. "Blackie is doing fine and we're hoping to remove the drip tonight."

"You seem to be in a really good mood," observed Heero. "What else has happened?"

Duo snickered. "Can't keep anything from you, can I?"

"No. Now, are you going to tell me or am I going to have to torture it out of you?" Heero pressed a few kisses of his own to Duo's throat and licked along the vet's ear.

Shivering with the sensation, Duo moaned softly. "That could all depend on what sort of torture you have in mind."

Knowing exactly where his boyfriend's thoughts were going, Heero changed tack and began to tickle Duo instead. Writhing and panting, Duo laughed and did his best to fend off the tickle attack, collapsing into a boneless heap on the bed amongst the socks when Heero finally ceased. "Going to tell me now or do you want more?" Heero's eyes held a certain amount of mischief in them as he loomed over his prone partner.

"I give up, I'll tell you," said Duo in-between giggles. Calming himself, Duo sat up. "I finally got Nrobbuts to cooperate."

Heero's face changed to a look of shock and then incredulity. "You did?"

"Yup. I loaded all the data on there like I usually do and this time the damn machine didn't swallow it but filed it all in the right places. And guess what?"

"What?"

"It's all still there! I can call it back up onto the screen when I want." Duo gave a lopsided grin.

To anyone else it would seem ridiculous to make such a fuss out of a simple thing like loading data
onto a computer; but Heero knew this was a major triumph for Duo, who was, to put it simply; computer illiterate. "That's great!" Heero dove in and kissed the vet senseless.

Surfacing for air, Duo smirked. "Hopefully I can repeat the performance tomorrow."

"I know you can."

After a few more minutes of kissing and a little necking, Heero allowed Duo to get up off the bed and gave him a hand to finish folding the laundry and put it away.

"You going to be working Zero this afternoon?" Duo asked as he placed the pile of boxers into his drawer.

"Yeah. I was going to take him out for a bush ride." Heero turned around and caught the look on Duo's face. "You want to come with me? Scythe could do with some exercise and I haven't got the time to ride them both."

"Actually, I was gonna ask if you'd mind if I rode with you and we went for a bush ride."

Heero quirked an eyebrow. "Something on your mind?"

Lowering his eyes, Duo replied, "Yeah. There's something I've been thinking about all morning and I wanted to run it by you and see what you thought. I'd rather not discuss it here though as we can be interrupted by the 'phone and other shit, I'd rather talk about it where there isn't anyone else, human or electronic, to disturb us."

"Sounds serious."

"It is in a way. Look, standing here chatting isn't getting things done. Would you mind catching the horses while I change? I'll meet you in the stables in a few and help to saddle up."

"Sure." Heero took another kiss. "I'll see you there shortly. Do you want me to let Hilde know we're going for a ride?"

"Nah, I'll do that while you get the nags."

"Okay." Heero left and went to fetch the horses, his mind puzzling over what it was Duo wanted to discuss. Duo finished off the last of the laundry, slipped on a pair of sweats as he didn't have any jodhpurs, and flatly refused to buy any after declaring them to be completely indecent, then contacted Hilde via the intercom to let her know he was going out for a ride with Heero.

* * *

The thick canopy of trees offered the pair a measure of shade as they rode along one of the many bridal trails surrounding the village of Salsbury where Duo had set up his veterinary practice. It was late afternoon and the sun was dropping lower in the sky but it was still quite warm. Scythe and Zero walked happily side by side, relaxed and on a loose rein as their riders also relaxed.

"What is it you wanted to talk about?" Heero asked as he shooed a fly away.

"I've been thinking..."

"I gathered that much."

"You want to hear this or not?"
"Sorry."

"As I said, I've been thinking, and contrary to belief, no it didn't cause a major brain melt down."

Heero snickered.

"The practice."

"What about it?" asked Heero.

"With most of your time taken up with getting Zero fit and ready for the season, as well as the time you need to spend at Treize's, it isn't fair to ask you to continue to do the accounts and play the role of vet nurse."

"I don't mind," Heero interrupted.

"I know you don't, Heero, and please don't take this the wrong way, but there are times during consults when I, and I know Hilde does as well, need to have someone manning the reception area or give us a hand with a patient. You can't always be there to do that."

Heero thought about Duo's words and knew they were true. He couldn't always be there to help out and if he was honest with himself, he was running himself ragged trying to keep up with it all. "What do you suggest?"

Duo gave a small sigh of relief, at least Heero was willing to hear him out. "You know Trowa's sister?"

"Catherine?"

"Yeah. She was a great help with Blackie and I know she hasn't had any formal training but I'm sure she would be an asset to the practice."

"From what Trowa was saying she's at a loose end at the moment with the circus and all being burned down," Heero said as his thoughts turned course to follow where he thought Duo was heading.

"My proposition is this," began Duo, deciding it was probably easier to just come out and say it. "I thought of offering Catherine a job as a receptionist and vet assistant. That way she can answer the phones, take bookings and be available to help when we need assistance."

"You just don't want to have to face Nrobbuts again in case you fail," teased Heero.

"Well, there is the matter of logging all the accounts and stuff onto the demon as well," grinned Duo. "What do you think? It would free you up much more to continue with your career."

"I think it's a good idea, Duo. Although..."

Duo could sense what Heero was about to say and beat him to the punch. "I'd still expect you to check the accounts weekly and monthly as well as do the books for me."

Heero breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been hoping Duo wouldn't want to dispense with his services completely. He felt a small twinge of unrest knowing Catherine would be taking over the duties he'd come to think of as his own but he had to be realistic here and Duo needed someone there for the consulting hours for the practice to run efficiently. "I'd be more than happy to continue to do the bookkeeping and keep track of the accounts for you, Duo. I think you should approach Catherine
and Trowa with this idea as soon as possible."

"You think she will take it up?"

"There's only one way to find out, but I'm sure she will be pleased you've asked."

"I'll give Trowa a call when we get back and see if Catherine can come over tomorrow for a chat," said Duo as he picked up his reins and urged Scythe into a trot.

Following behind on Zero, Heero thought it was a wonderful idea and hoped that Catherine would accept the job offer.

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tbc...
Chapter 5

Duo asked Hilde her opinion on Catherine that evening after consults were finished. Hilde thought it was a good idea, having suffered her own guilt attacks for leaving the 'phone to ring, being unable to answer it as she'd been busy with a client. His mind made up, Duo had called Trowa and arranged to pop over the following afternoon and visit. Trowa had been curious as to why Duo would want to call and even more so when Duo had asked for Catherine to be present as well but refrained from asking why out of politeness. He knew he would have his answer the following day.

Hilde stayed for dinner and watched a movie with the guys before taking her leave. Heero did a final check on the horses and locked the stables while Duo checked the surgery and Blackie. The drip had been removed earlier that evening as the cat had shown signs of wanting to move around and even tried to lap a little water. Once Duo had been sure that the cat could drink by itself okay, he'd taken the drip out. Providing all went well over night he'd see if he could get Blackie to eat a little something in the morning. Having cooked a chicken casserole for dinner, Duo had saved a small portion of the 'gravy' for just that purpose. Blackie wouldn't be able to eat solid food for a while yet but the chicken gravy would be easy for the cat to lap up and provide some nutrients.

With everything taken care of, Duo locked up the house and followed Heero to bed. Snuggling into the warmth and comfort of his lover's arms, Duo hoped he would get a little more rest that night.

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Morning arrived all too soon; fortunately Duo had managed to get a better night's sleep than the previous evening. Heero got up and commenced the morning ritual while Duo remained huddled under the blankets and dozing for a while longer. Not long after Heero had departed, Duo got up and commenced his own morning tasks.

The consults went well with there being the usual appointments for vaccinations, one nail trimming, an abscess to flush and treat, and a clean and scale of a dog's teeth. Hilde arrived shortly after Duo had closed the surgery and busied herself tending to Blackie while Duo attempted to conquer the demon known as Nrobbuts for the second time. The odd grunt, curse and snort that emanated from the reception area told Hilde it was best to stay with the recovering cat for a little while longer. Once silence had returned, Hilde ventured out and went to see if it was safe to enter the reception area or if she would need full riot gear.

Duo looked up to see a cream colored surgical glove stuck on the end of one of the teeth rasps they used for horses teeth waving from the doorway. He couldn't help but give a snicker at the absurd sight.

"I surrender," came Hilde's voice from the other side of the doorway. "Is it safe to come in? I swear I don't have any weapons."

"It's safe," replied Duo with a grin.

Hilde followed the tooth rasp and glove into the reception area. "How did it go?" she asked, looking pointedly at the computer.

"Seems to be okay so far," replied Duo as he focused back on the machine. He typed in a few more commands, hit the enter button and sat back to see what happened. "Yes!" he said and punched the
air. "Score two for me!"

"Don't tell me..."

Duo nodded, a wide grin on his face.

"Twice in a row, huh?"

"Yup."

Hilde gazed at the screen. "Great! At this rate I'll be able to come in later."

"Pardon?"

"If you're managing to get all the files sorted out and loaded I can come in a little later now as I won't have to do it for you."

"Why you cheeky..." Duo jumped up and grabbed Hilde, tickling her mercilessly.

"Agghhh... Stop! I give up," laughed Hilde as she tried to fend off the attack.

Duo relented and let the other vet go. "Just remember who the boss is around here," he stated with a smirk.

"Yes, your majesty," replied Hilde with a mock bow.

"Any more of that and you can clean out the kennels for the next month."

Hilde rolled her eyes. "Yes, boss."

"That's better." Duo said and then turned back to the computer to shut it down. "Did Blackie manage to eat any of the broth I put in for him?"

"Yeah. There wasn't much left in the bowl. I didn't empty it out in case you wanted to see how much he'd managed to lap up."

"Thanks. I'll go check." Duo left the reception area and went to check on the cat. He was pleased to see that Blackie had managed to lap up about half of the liquid. "Good boy," murmured Duo as he stroked the cat after checking the animal's jaw. Blackie purred.

"When do you think he will be able to go home?" Hilde asked.

"I'd say in another three or four days if he's eating and drinking okay. He'll need to stay on a liquid diet for a couple of weeks and then progress to soft foods."

"I'll let Mrs. Marx know if you like?"

"Thanks, Hilde."

"You think the pins and plates will have to stay in permanently?"

"Possibly. We will give him another x-ray in about six weeks and see how the jaw is looking then. It all depends on the bones and how they knit back together."

"The legs appear to be doing okay."

"You did a great job on those, Hilde," said Duo as he smiled at the other vet and closed the kennel
"Thanks." Hilde blushed a little at the compliment.

"I'm going to head off now. You should be okay this afternoon, nothing is booked in for surgery and the evening consults aren't full yet. I'll have my pager on me and Heero should be back around three. I'm going to head over to Trowa's so if you need any help just grab Heero or if necessary, page me."

"Will do. Everything will be fine though so don't worry. Good luck with Catherine."

"Thanks." Duo took his leave and headed back to the house to change and visit Trowa. Hilde returned to the reception area to gaze in amusement at the computer.

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Trowa was busy in the kennels when he heard the sound of a car pulling up. He quickly finished putting the last two bags of dog biscuits onto the stack, wiped his hands on his jeans and went outside. He smiled when he saw Duo getting out of the car.

"Hey, Trowa," called Duo as he locked the vehicle and walked to meet the other man.

Trowa shook hands with the vet, barely managing to keep his curiosity about the visit at bay. "Catherine is just finishing up with the puppies. I'll give her a shout to let her know you're here."

"No rush," replied Duo. "Got many animals in at the moment?"

"A few. Six dogs, four puppies, three litters of kittens, eight cats and a goat."

"A goat?" Duo chuckled. "Where the hell did that come from?"

"Got a 'phone call the other day from some elderly lady. The goat had wandered into her yard about two weeks ago. She didn't know where it had come from and despite advertising it as being found, no one came forward to claim it. She couldn't keep it as she didn't have the room for it, besides, it had begun to eat her garden plants and I don't think her husband was too impressed. I'm hoping I can find a home for it," said Trowa as he led Duo along a concrete pathway between kennels that housed various dogs of differing breeds.

"Good luck with that," replied Duo as he took in the various canines who rushed up to the wire to bark at him.

They stopped outside a large pen where Cathy was playing tug-of-war with three puppies. The fourth pup lay to one side watching the proceedings.

"Duo's here," said Trowa softly as he watched the game.

"Oh. Hi, Duo. I won't be a minute."

"That's fine, I didn't mean to interrupt your game," said Duo as he watched.

Cathy gathered up a few toys and placed them in the corner of the pen. Checking the water bowl, she carefully stepped over the pups that seemed determined to get under her feet and exited the pen. "You will have a coffee while you're here?"

"I'd love one," replied Duo.

"Good. How's the cat?" Cathy asked as the three of them made their way towards the house.
"Blackie is doing fine. He's off the drip and starting to lap up some fluids. I expect he will make a full recovery." Duo paused at the door to the house to let Catherine enter first.

The three entered the small kitchen where Cathy and Trowa both washed their hands before Cathy set the things up for coffee, Trowa helping her. Duo took a seat at the small table and gazed around. He liked Trowa's place, it was small, smaller than his own home but no less comfortable. Cozy was the word that sprang to Duo's mind every time he visited.

Placing the mugs of coffee on the table, Trowa and Cathy sat, Trowa unable to hold his curiosity any longer.

"What can we do for you, Duo?"

Duo took a sip of his beverage and reclined back, making eye contact with Trowa. "It's Catherine I really want to speak to as what I have to say concerns her the most."

Cathy felt a tremor of fear go up her spine. Had she done something wrong when helping out the other day? Was that what Duo was here for? To let her know she'd committed some grievous error? "Me?" she managed to get out past the knot of fear that threatened to take her voice from her.

Duo put his mug down on the table and leaned forward, lowering his eyes to his hands that fidgeted on the table surface and took a deep breath. "My veterinary practice is growing and along with the increased clientele, there comes a need for an increase in the staff to run it. Hilde and I share the veterinary side of the duties and Heero does the books. He also played the role of our receptionist and vet nurse. As you know, Heero has aspirations to compete at International level in his sport of showjumping and I intend to help him all I can in his quest to reach the top." Duo paused for a breath before continuing. "Heero is currently riding for the Khushrenada stable as well as preparing Zero for the season's competitions. As you can imagine, it doesn't leave him with a whole lot of time for the vet practice."

Catherine frowned. "I can see what you're saying, Duo, but what does that have to do with me?"

Trowa had an idea of where this was going and leaned back in his chair keeping his face neutral while inside he was smiling.

"Catherine, do you mind if I ask you a sort of personal question?" Duo looked the woman in the eye. "Um, no."

"What are your plans at the moment? I know the circus burnt to the ground, Trowa and yourself explained all that the other night. I'm curious to know what you intend to do now that the circus is gone?"

Catherine lowered her eyes, her mind deep in thought at Duo's question. She hadn't really given a lot of thought as to what she would do now that the circus was gone, she was still grieving in her own way at the loss of pretty much her entire way of life. "I - I don't know. I hadn't given it much thought. I think I'm still coming to terms with the loss and was planning on staying here with Trowa and helping out at the shelter for a while, well for as long as he can put up with me, that is." Cathy gave her brother a sad smile.

"You're welcome to stay here with me for as long as you want," said Trowa softly.

"I know and I appreciate that, but... You have your own life, Trowa, and the shelter isn't what I want to spend the rest of my life working in; no offense."
"None taken."

"If I may," interrupted Duo. "I think I have a solution to the problem."

"You do?" asked Cathy.

"As I've just explained about Heero and the fact that he's spreading himself a bit thin at the moment." Duo scratched the back of his neck as he tried to think of the best way to offer Catherine a job. In the end he decided to simply come out and say it. "The practice needs a full time receptionist come vet nurse. Hilde and I can't leave a client to answer the 'phone every time it rings, and there are times when we need another person there who is skilled in animal handling to help with a client's animal or assist in surgery. I was impressed with your professionalism when you helped out with Blackie the other day and although I know you don't have any proper training in the field of vet nursing, I'm confident in your skills enough to ask if you would be interested in filling the spot of receptionist come vet assistant at the practice?"

There was silence in the kitchen as Duo's offer sank in. Trowa was amused at the expression on his sister's face, it wasn't often she was rendered speechless. Cathy, meanwhile, was trying to wrap her brain around the proposition. *Duo wanted her to come and work at the vet practice?*

"I - I don't know what to say," began the woman. "I'm flattered that you should ask but I'm not qualified enough."

"I take it you can answer a 'phone?" said Duo with an amused look.

"Well, yes."

"And you can write legibly?"

"Yes."

"I know you're not squeamish..."

Cathy snorted. "No, I'm not."

"And you're not afraid of handling animals."

"No, I did a lot of work with the big cats in the circus."

"Had any experience with computers?"

"A little."

"Then what's stopping you from saying yes?"

"Ah..." Cathy didn't have an answer to that.

Duo gave the woman one of his charming grins. "It's not that hard. All we would need for you to do is be there from nine in the morning until twelve thirty and then again in the evening from five until seven thirty. If we have anything booked in for surgery that we need assistance for then you will be required to return at two for that. We will know a couple of days beforehand about the surgery so you will be given plenty of warning; unless of course we get an emergency. Your duties would be to man the reception area, check off the clients as they come in for their appointments, have their files out ready for us to take through when we call them, answer the 'phone and take bookings for appointments and surgery. There's also the matter of taking payments, writing out receipts and then..."
logging all the day's consults into the computer program. Heero will go through and manage the books weekly and then do up the accounts at the end of each month for sending out."

Trowa blew out a breath of air, ruffling his long bang. "Sounds like a lot of work but I guess it isn't all that much."

"Actually it's no where near as difficult as it might sound. I'd suggest if Cathy is interested that she comes to the surgery on Monday when Heero is there; it's his day off from the stable, and he will show you exactly what is involved. I'll pay you the award wages as well as holiday pay and sick leave."

Catherine slowly digested all the information. The offer was tempting, but she still wasn't sure she would be able to do it.

"Why don't you at least give it a try? Come over on Monday, spend the day learning what's involved and then see what you think. If you want to give it a go we can set a trial period of two weeks; at the end of the fortnight if you're not coping for whatever reason then you can leave. But... If you are coping okay and enjoying the job, then you're welcome to stay." Duo picked up his mug of now luke warm coffee and drank it down.

"What do you think, Trowa? Catherine asked as she faced her brother.

"I think it's a generous offer and I know you can do it," replied Trowa honestly. Seeing the shadow pass over his sister's face, Trowa knew exactly where her thoughts were going and he spoke up quickly to waylay those thoughts. "I'll be fine here at the shelter, you can still help out on your days off if you wish as well as in-between your shifts."

Catherine shook her head and gave a laugh. "I know you'll be fine here, Trowa, you've been managing by yourself for ages and really don't need me." She turned her attention to Duo. "Okay, I'll give it a go," she said with a warm smile. "And thank you for asking me to work for you. I'd like to give it a two week trial and come in on Monday to learn the ropes."

"That's great! I know you will fit in easily and do a good job," beamed Duo.

"I've got a question," said Trowa.

Catherine and Duo both turned to look expectantly at the tall man.

"Who's going to show her how to tame that thing you call Nrobbuts?"

"Nrobbuts?" questioned Catherine while Duo turned a few shades of red.

"Duo's demon of a computer," explained Trowa with a smirk.

"Oh? Is there something I'm missing here?"

"I'll have you know I can now load all I need to onto the hard drive and not lose a thing," replied Duo hotly.

"So, you're going to show Cathy how to use the computer program?" Trowa raised his one visible eyebrow.

"Nah, Heero will."

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Having finalized all the details with Catherine and Trowa, Duo took his leave and went back home. When he pulled up he headed down to the paddock. Heero's car was parked by the stables and Duo knew he would be working Zero in the paddock Heero had set up for schooling in. As he approached the fence he could hear the sound of thudding hooves before Zero and his handsome rider came into view. Duo paused at the fence and watched, happy to keep his presence secret for the moment and watch the pair in action.

Duo's mind wandered back to the first time he'd seen Heero and his horse at the Salsbury Agricultural show. He'd admired the combination then, noting how Heero seemed to literally become a part of his horse. The pair were a sheer joy to watch, the trust, skill and raw beauty of the pair demanded your attention; and Duo was happy to give his. Heero was taking the gray around a few of the jumps he'd set up in the paddock. While Duo wasn't an experienced horseman he'd learnt enough from his own dealings with the animals and Heero's patient teaching to understand the basics a lot better and could now tell how a horse was performing simply by looking.

Zero appeared to be in a good mood, his gray tail kinked up, gait light and bouncy. While Heero seemed to be doing nothing other than sitting in the saddle, Duo could tell the man was seriously busy, keeping his horse together and moving forward with grace and confidence. Zero's ears went forward as his rider turned him towards a large upright fence. Duo eyed it up and guessed it was around four foot six, fairly high but not as high as what Zero would be required to jump if he was to catch the selectors' eye for the Nations Cup team.

Heero was concentrating hard, keeping Zero at a steady pace, full of impulsion yet light and responsive between his hand and leg. He lined the fence up and brought Zero around to face it. Steadying the horse, Heero applied a little more leg and felt Zero respond by lengthening his stride. Hands were light on the reins, just holding the horse in check with a simple touch. Three strides away from the jump, Heero let his body weight shift forwards and up out of the saddle slightly, taking his own weight through his leg to the stirrups but still riding Zero forwards. Zero responded by bringing his hindquarters underneath himself and gathering his body together in readiness for take off.

Hind legs came well underneath and Zero pushed himself up from the ground. Forelegs left the earth and tucked up underneath his chest as his hind end propelled the large body into the air. Heero followed the movement of his horse, hands sliding up the neck so as not to interfere with Zero's mouth and forward momentum. Hind legs left the ground and Zero sailed up over the poles seeming to hang in mid air for a brief moment before his forelegs began to unfold and stretch out in preparation for the landing. Hooves bit into the turf as the gray landed and then Zero was moving away from the jump, Heero sitting down in his saddle and bringing the animal back together again, patting the gray neck as he did so.

Circling around and bringing Zero back to a walk, Heero spotted the vet leaning against the paddock fence and turned the horse around to ride over.

"Nice jump," said Duo as he patted Zero's neck when Heero brought the horse to a halt beside the fence.

"I'm pleased with him," replied Heero as he stroked the sweaty shoulder. "He's coming along nicely and should hit his peak about a quarter of the way into the season."

"Good." Duo moved aside to the gate and opened it for Hero to ride through. Closing it behind the horse, Duo walked beside the animal as Heero rode back to the stable block.

"Did you speak to Catherine?" asked Heero as he dismounted and led Zero inside to unsaddle.
"Yeah, I did," replied Duo as he leaned against the stable wall and watched his boyfriend as he went about brushing Zero down in preparation for rugging him up.

"What did she say?"

Duo repeated what had transpired at Trowa's and finished up by letting Heero know she would be coming over on the Monday to learn the basics.

"That's great. It will certainly help you out and ease the load a little for me too," responded Heero from underneath Zero's belly where he was brushing the dried sweat away.

Duo passed over Zero's cotton rug. "I think she will work out okay."

"Can't see any reason why she shouldn't," stated Heero as he clipped up the leg straps.

Duo didn't respond immediately, he'd picked up Zero's saddle and was taking it into the tack room to place it on the saddle horse. He emerged a moment later with some familiar orange things in his hand. Zero wuffled as he caught the smell of carrots. "She's going to come in on a two week trial period," began Duo as he fed Zero a carrot. "Depending on how she goes during those two weeks will determine if she stays on permanently or leaves. Geeze, you're a real piglet, Zero," Duo chastised the horse as Zero pinched the remainder of the carrot from Duo's hand.

Heero snickered. "I'm betting she stays."

"I hope so," sighed Duo. "Okay, piggy, here's the rest of it. How the heck you can fit any more into that gob of yours is beyond me," growled Duo as he watched the greedy animal take the rest of the carrots. Zero's mouth was that full some of the carrot bits were dropping out as he tried to chew.

"I never did manage to teach him any manners," stated Heero as he watched his horse stuffing the carrots down his throat and then vacuuming the floor for the bits he'd dropped.

"I'm glad you don't eat like that," snorted Duo.

"That's one thing about me, I'm fairly well house trained," replied Heero as he came up behind Duo and wrapped his arms around his boyfriend's waist, pulling him back against his chest.

Duo reached an arm up and back around Heero's neck, tilting and turning his head until he could see into those cobalt depths. "Perfectly house trained I'd say." Duo's lips stole a kiss.

Heero nuzzled against Duo's neck for a moment before breaking the connection. "I'll finish bringing the horses in and meet you up the house for dinner in about half an hour."

"Okay. I'll go start cooking and check that Hilde is okay."

"I've left some paperwork on the kitchen table, just show schedules and stuff. Dump it on the dresser if it's in your way."

"Show schedules?" Duo's ears pricked up as he followed Heero who was leading Zero into his stable.

"Yeah. I got a few in the mail today and some from Treize. I want to go through them after dinner and plan out the shows for Zero. If you don't mind I would appreciate a little help with it."

"I don't mind, could be fun," smiled Duo.

Heero shut the stable door and kissed the vet. "Thanks."
"No problem."

"I'll make it worth your while," said Heero in a low tone.

"You don't have to... oh... Mmmmm... nice." Duo's mind went on a hiatus as his body responded to the gentle caresses Heero was gifting his back and buttocks with whilst nuzzling along his throat again.

"I know I don't have to, I want to."

"That's fine with me, Heero."

"Good. I'll see you up the house shortly." Heero pulled away and went to fetch Scythe and Shini from the paddocks leaving a slightly dazed and partially aroused vet behind him.

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tbc...
Chapter 6

Duo left the stables and went back up to the house. He checked that Hilde was okay with the evening consults before turning his attention to making dinner. He spotted the pile of papers on the kitchen table and glanced quickly through them. There seemed to be quite a few so Duo carefully picked them up and put them on the dresser so they wouldn't get messed up while he cooked dinner.

Putting the lamb cutlets into the oven to cook, Duo turned his attention to the vegetables, quickly peeling and chopping up a selection. The vegetables went into a saucepan on the stove and while the dinner cooked he set the table with cutlery and condiments. Dinner was almost done when he heard the scrape of Heero's boots against the boot jack at the back door.

"Something smells good," said Heero as he stepped inside and inhaled deeply.

"Lamb chops and veggies," replied Duo as he gave his boyfriend a kiss. "I'll be dishing it up in a few minutes so you have time for a shower if you want to take it now."

"Thanks. I think I will." Heero sniffed at his armpits. "I'm a bit ripe."

"Overdone would be more like it," snickered Duo as he wrinkled his nose.

"Hey! I do not stink," huffed Heero.

"I didn't say you did. I happen to like the smell of horse, sweat and body odor. Well, the horse bit is okay, the sweat could mean a lot of things and as for the body odor..."

Heero shook his head. "I get the hint." He walked off in the direction of the bathroom, Duo's chuckling following behind him.

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"That was delicious," stated Heero as he put down the bone he'd been gnawing on and wiped his mouth with his napkin. "My compliments to the chef."

Duo blushed slightly. "Why, thank you, kind sir, but I cannot take all the credit. Harriet helped out as well."

"Harriet?" Heero quirked an eyebrow. This was a new one on him. Heero did a quick mental check. 
_ Nrobbuts the computer - Gertrude the washing machine - Fido the vacuum cleaner. Yup, all present correct and accounted for so who the hell was Harriet?_

"The stove."

"Ah."

"You want to have a look through those show schedules before or after we clean up?" Duo said, breaking into Heero's thoughts.

"Uh, after. I'll wash up." Heero got to his feet and began to collect the dirty dishes, placing them in the sink and filling it with hot water. Whilst doing the dishes, Heero mused over what Duo could have possibly named the lawn mower, or the hot water system; come to think of it, Duo had been muttering under his breath to the new clothes dryer they'd bought during the winter.
While Heero did the dishes, Duo pottered around clearing the table and then making coffee. With the pots and pans now clean and drying on the dish drainer, the pair sat down with their coffees, Heero grabbing the show schedules and a pen.

Duo picked up one of the schedules and glanced at it. "What exactly are we planning out here, Heero?"

"I need to work out which shows and classes to enter Zero in. The selectors are going to be in attendance at some of the shows so they are a must if I want to get onto the short list. I've got a copy here somewhere of which shows are qualifiers and the ones the selectors will be at." Heero rifled through the papers.

"Looks to me like we could do with a calendar here."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"I'll grab the one from the lounge. You want me to get your diary for you as well?"

"That would be wonderful. Thanks, Duo."

Smiling, Duo went and fetched the needed items, including his own diary. When he returned Heero had located the paper he was looking for and was busy scanning over it. "Ready to start when you are, boss," Duo snickered as he spread the calendar out and picked up his pen.

Heero gave a snort as he watched the vet's antics. After half an hour of sorting though they had a list of shows planned out for Zero. Starting off at a few smaller ones to bring Zero along gradually and then building up to a few harder ones when he should be hitting his peak form. The season was planned to round off with six major competitions of which the selectors would be in attendance at four.

Duo had mapped out the shows on the calendar, making sure that Zero got a reasonable break in-between to recover and not overly stress himself. Once that was done he copied all the dates and show names down onto a piece of paper for easier reference and handed it to Heero.

"Thanks." Heero scanned over the page of dates and shows. "This looks really good. Now I can go back over the shows and see what events are being held and where for the two horses of Treize's I'm riding. If I can get all that down in black and white I can take it with me when I go to Treize's tomorrow and see what he thinks."

Duo rubbed his eyes and fished the pen out from behind his ear where he'd tucked it. "Okay. What grade are they and where do you want to start?"

* * *

It took a while to figure out and coordinate the shows for all three horses. Some weekends there were shows for just Taurus and Sandrock, other shows had events only suitable for Zero; but there were a few that had classes for all three. With a final list written out, all that remained was for Heero to take that list to Treize and see what the other rider thought about it and then trim the shows from there.

Duo gave a yawn, covering his mouth and sighed softly. Heero's eyes were aching along with his shoulders from being hunched over the table and going through the schedules. His right shoulder ached more, a legacy of his fall a couple of years ago. The hands on the clock showed ten after ten. Warily, Heero scooped all the schedules together and along with the finalized list, put them in a neat pile on the dresser.
Walking over to Duo, Heero began to massage the vet's shoulders and neck. "Thanks for all your help, Duo."

"Mmm... That's nice, Heero; and you're welcome. I like going through the shows, seeing which competitions they're holding and what would be suitable for Zero."

Leaning over, Heero lifted the thick braid of hair and draped it over Duo's shoulder. Then he began to kiss along the nape of Duo's neck, feeling the skin shiver under his lips.

Duo's eyes closed as his skin came alive. Heero's kisses were welcomed with soft sighs and gentle moans. As those lips continued in their pleasurable worship, Duo became aware of Heero's hands sliding around his chest, palms rubbing in pleasant circles as they worked towards his nipples. When they found his nipples they continued in their torment, rubbing over the nubs and encouraging them to hardness.

His nipples weren't the only thing that was getting hard either. Duo could feel the heat pooling in his groin and groaned.

"Want to take this somewhere more comfortable?" Heero murmured.

"Ahhh. I think we'd better."

Heero paused in his ministrations and helped Duo to his feet. He knew the vet was tired, he was tired too, but Duo hadn't been sleeping too well these past few nights with Blackie on the critical list. Heero's tiredness was from the fresh air and working horses all day. They walked along the hall to the bedroom where Heero left Duo to undress while he went back through the house and checked that everywhere was locked for the night. Turning off the kitchen light, Heero navigated back to the bedroom using the soft glow of the bedside lamps that spilled out into the hall.

Closing the door behind him, Heero smiled at the lump under the bed covers. Quickly he stripped off his clothes, turned off the lamps and joined his lover between the sheets. Immediately Duo snuggled up to him and Heero wrapped his arms around his lover, cuddling him close and enjoying the intimacy.

Kisses began to feather along a creamy throat and Duo moaned as he tilted his head back to allow Heero better access. His excitement began to build again, his cock stirring slightly between his legs as Heero gently teased and aroused his willing body.

Fingers began to roam, tracing the lines of Duo's body, skimming over back muscles and leaving them shivering in their wake. Trails of fire followed those fingertips as they caressed along an inner thigh, only to disappear and reappear seconds later in another sensitive spot. Heero's own need was rising steadily and he could feel Duo's erection pressing against the material of Duo's boxers.

Duo brought his own hands into play. He wanted to return the pleasure he was being gifted and began a journey of exploration of his own. His hands worked their way over the hard planes of Heero's body, smoothing along the warm skin of Heero's back, dipping lower and tracing over firm buttocks. His own erection was growing by the minute and he could feel Heero's answering hardness pressing against his thigh. With a secret smile, Duo pushed his thigh between Heero's legs, giving the rider something to rub against, at the same time his own cock pressed against Heero's hip and offered him the same friction.

Hips began to move languidly, humping gently and stimulating sensitive flesh. Hands remained occupied, Duo's worming their way into Heero's underwear and running over the skin of Heero's backside while Heero's fingers continued to toy with Duo's nipples. Having gotten his hand inside
Heero's boxers, Duo's fingers traced the cleft, slowly delving deeper into the crevice until he found what he sought. Duo's index finger began to circle the tiny entrance, teasing the nerves and causing Heero's breath to hitch and gentle moans leave his throat.

"More, Duo," Heero panted as his cock rode Duo's thigh and he tried to encourage the finger to penetrate him. They hadn't had sex in the literal sense for a few days, both of them having been too occupied with other happenings and by the time they made it to bed they were too exhausted to do anything. Despite the tiredness though, Heero wanted his partner to make love to him.

Careful, Duo eased his finger inside, enjoying the intense heat and tightness that awaited him. Mindful of the fact that he hadn't used any lube as yet, Duo took things easy and slow, keeping the penetration to a minimum and opting to tease the tight muscle instead.

"Please," moaned Heero.

"In a minute, Heero. I need the lube, I don't want to hurt you." Still teasing the tight hole, Duo fished around under the pillow with his other hand and finally located the tube of KY Jelly. Opening the tube he removed his hand from inside Heero's boxers and quickly coated his fingers.

While Duo was busy with the lube, Heero pushed his boxers down over his hips and to his knees where he let his legs and feet push them the rest of the way off. They disappeared somewhere in the sheets but Heero didn't care as Duo's slippery finger found his entrance again and began to push inside.

Working his finger inside, Duo coated Heero's channel with the lube as he worked on loosening the tight muscles. Heero's hips continued to thrust lazily against his thigh, the now free erection dribbling pre-come and smearing it against his skin. A second finger followed and then a third, Heero's muscles and passage relaxing around the digits and accepting the intrusion. Duo pushed in deep and crooked his fingers, searching for that magical spot.

Heero's back arched and he moaned low and long as Duo found his prostate. "Ahhh... Right there, Duo," he said in a voice that trembled with pleasure. "Good, so good. Want more, want you."

Withdrawing his fingers, Duo hastily pushed his own boxers off and reached for the lube to coat his hardness. As he slicked the length so Heero shifted to lie on his back, raising and spreading his legs in invitation. The sight was so delicious that Duo was shaking in anticipation. With his cock now fully coated in the slippery substance, Duo settled himself between Heero's legs and positioned his cock head at the small hole. He found Heero's eyes and held them with his own, a mixture of love and lust shining in violet depths as Duo began to press forwards.

The initial push was met with resistance, but Heero willed himself to relax, his body softening and allowing Duo to enter his passage. The steady inward slide was taken slowly and gently, something Heero was grateful for. The initial burn of penetration always left him feeling a little off balance, but he soon recovered once Duo was seated completely inside and paused to let the channel adjust. Feeling a bit more comfortable and knowing it would only get better from here on in, Heero rolled his hips to let his partner know he was ready for some action.

Duo's breathing was coming in sharp gasps as he tried to hold himself in check. Being buried inside Heero's tight body, that sheath caressing and rippling against his length always threatened to make him lose it prematurely. The gentle squeezing of Heero's anal muscles, combined with the roll of hips told him that the rider was ready to be ridden. With a deep breath, Duo began his retreat, sliding his cock back out of Heero's channel and then plunging back in again seconds later.

Their lovemaking was slow and tender, the pleasure building at a steady pace. Both men were too
tired to go at it hard and fast, preferring a more gentle pace that allowed them to really enjoy and appreciate the intimacy of the act they shared. Duo's hips thrust repeatedly into Heero's channel, his length teased by the heat and tightness of Heero's body. Underneath, Heero's eyes were closed, soft whimpers and moans escaping his lips as his sheath was caressed, the internal nerves stroked and encouraged to enjoy the pleasure. Occasionally Duo's cock head would connect with Heero's prostate and the dark haired man would squirm and writhe beneath his partner, breath hitching as his body shook from the sensations.

Neither man wanted the pleasure to end but unfortunately, it had to. Sensations built, nerves were overstimulated and both felt the rising tide of their respective orgasms beginning to take them. Duo reached between their bodies and curled his fingers around Heero's shaft. Applying gentle pressure he began to stroke the organ in countenance to his thrusts, adding to Heero's pleasure.

Familiar heat began to build, the edge hovering just out of reach as both men rose to achieve their release. Striking Heero's prostate once more, it was enough to send the rider over the brink and tumbling into ecstasy. Shudders passed through his frame while semen spurted from his cock to coat Duo's hand and his own belly, Heero welcoming the release with a cry as his nerves all threatened to drown him with pleasure.

Duo was only seconds behind. His cock stroked by Heero's channel, coaxing his seed from his body was too much for him to resist. With a stiffening of his spine and a keening wail, Duo let go and fell into nirvana. His seed was eagerly devoured by Heero's channel, the strong, inner muscles squeezing and drawing all they could from the vet's cock as Duo spilled himself.

With the last waves of pleasure rolling through them, Duo collapsed against Heero who immediately wrapped the vet in his strong arms and cuddled him close. They lay together, still joined as their breathing and heart rates slowly returned to normal. Once able to move again, Duo shifted, his softened cock slipping from inside Heero as he lay upon his side and contemplated getting up to fetch a wash cloth and clean their bodies up. He felt Heero shift and cracked open an eye. "Where are you going?"

"To get a cloth and clean us up."

Duo chuckled. "I was just thinking about doing the same thing."

"Were you now?" Heero smiled at the sated vet. "Stay there, I'll be right back." Heero padded out the bedroom and fetched a cloth. Tenderly he cleaned them both off and then crawled back under the covers, still naked. His boxers were somewhere in the sheets but Heero didn't have the energy to find them. He was sure they would still be there in the morning.

Snuggling into Heero's arms, Duo couldn't be bothered putting his boxers back on either. That's assuming he could have found them. He knew they were on the floor somewhere but right now he didn't care, he was too sleepy and content. As he drifted off to sleep, Duo hoped he wouldn't get a call out during the night.

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Monday morning rolled around and with it Catherine's arrival at the surgery for her introduction to the practice. Duo greeted her and showed her around the small surgery, starting with the reception area, visiting the consulting room, operating theater and kennels. Catherine had seen most of the place when she'd helped with Blackie's operation, but that had been brief. Duo took the time to show her the layout properly before leaving her in Heero's capable hands and preparing for the morning's consults.
Heero patiently explained the set up of the reception area, where the client files were kept, how the filing system worked and the appointments book. He showed the woman how he usually worked, looking through the bookings and locating the client files, stacking them in order of their appointment times on one side of the desk and then placing them in the small alcove for Duo as each client arrived so the vet would simply have to pick up the file and call the client through.

Cathy was amazed at the efficiency Heero showed and could only hope she would be able to do the job half as well as he seemed to. She sat to one side and observed the quiet man for a while, following what he did with her eyes and taking it all in. After an hour of observation, Heero moved to one side and let Catherine have a shot at running the reception. At first she was a little edgy and nervous, but that was to be expected. As time wore on though, she began to relax and followed Heero's instructions with ease.

During a lull between consults, Duo came out into the reception area to see how she was getting on and was pleased to see that Catherine appeared to be settling in quite well. Heero commented that the woman seemed to have a natural rapport with the public and dealt with the clients easily and efficiently, her relaxed manner putting them at ease in regards to their pets. Duo returned to the consulting room and left the pair to it.

Catherine picked up on the office routine quickly; it was like Duo had said, it sounded complex and a lot of work but in reality it was fairly simple. Heero assisted her in writing out the first few receipts, pointing out on the wall a scale of fees and charges Duo used for the different treatments. When things got quiet for a few minutes, Heero showed Cathy the drugs cabinet and 'fridge, pointing out the ones Duo used on a regular basis along with the clipboard they used to record the drug usage. Date, dose and client name all had to be recorded on the sheet of paper in accordance with the strict rules set down by the Veterinary Board. The paperwork had to be kept in triplicate and a copy sent to the board at the end of each month, one copy retained for the practice records and another sent to the government.

Cathy could see the logic in that.

The morning passed quickly and Catherine found she'd enjoyed herself, It was nice to feel useful again, to work around the animals, it helped ease a little of the grief she was still feeling. As the last client departed and Heero closed the door, Duo reappeared. Heero began to clean up, sweeping the waiting room, tidying up the magazines and emptying the rubbish. Duo questioned Cathy about her morning. Had she enjoyed it? Did she find she could cope okay? Were there any questions?

Catherine replied as honestly as she could. Yes, she'd enjoyed it. Yes, she thought she would be able to cope okay and the only question she had was regarding the computer. "Heero said something about the client files needing to be recorded into the computer's database at the end of consults, but he hasn't shown me how to do that yet."

"Ah." Duo looked around. Heero seemed to have disappeared for the moment. Nervously, Duo eyed off his nemesis and then decided he'd conquered the demon twice running so why not a third? He pressed the button and turned to Cathy. "I'll show you what we do," he said with more confidence than he felt.

Patiently, Duo went through the motions of showing Catherine the program Heero had set up and modified specifically for the practice. Step by step, he went through each stage, discreetly following the instructions Heero had given him. The data appeared on the screen and Duo gave a sigh of relief. "Once all the information is logged in, it's simply a case of saving it all to the hard drive," he said with a smile and hit the enter button.

The computer made a few interesting noises, gave what sounded like a hiccup and went completely
Duo stared in disbelief.

"I take it it's not supposed to do that?"

Duo hit the enter button again - nothing. "Why you useless piece of shit!" Duo stabbed viciously at the enter button several times.

Nrobbuts whirred, coughed, burped and fizzed in reply.

"Damn friggin', defiant excuse for technology! I should have fried your circuits a long time ago," ranted Duo at the screen that now happily displayed the blue screen of death.

"Definitely not supposed to do that," Catherine said with an amused look on her face.

~ * ~

tbc.......
Chapter 7

Catherine watched as the vet let fly with a barrage of curses at the computer, only when it looked like Duo was about to attack the computer with the stapler did she intervene. "Ah, Doctor Maxwell, I don't think putting a metallic object through the screen is going to be a good idea. Metal, electricity and the resulting broken circuits would not be beneficial to your current state of health."

Duo paused and turned slowly to face the woman. He blinked a couple of times and then dropped the stapler back to the desk. "You're right," he sighed. "Maybe I'll just rearrange its innards when it's switched off, castrate its chips or something." Duo slumped in his chair. "I just don't get it," he groaned. "It's not that hard to do, just type in the information, make sure it's in the right folders and on the right forms then save it all to the hard drive. I did it the other day without any problems, and the day before that."

Catherine patted the vet lightly on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm sure it's something simple."

"What's simple?" asked Heero as he reappeared from putting out the trash.

"This useless piece of crap has kidnapped all my data again and refuses to give it back. It's holding it hostage somewhere in its circuits and as if that's not bad enough it's gone blue screen on me," grumbled Duo as he glared hatefully at the computer.

Heero suppressed the smirk. "Let me have a look at it, I should be able to figure out what's going on with it."

Grudgingly, Duo got up and let Heero take the chair. "I've said it before and I'll say it again, that thing is possessed, it doesn't need a computer technician, it needs a priest."

"A priest?" asked Catherine.

"Yeah. It needs an exorcism."

Catherine snorted. "Isn't that a bit drastic?"

"You haven't had to deal with its demonic capabilities - yet."

"Duo, it doesn't need exorcising, there is nothing supernatural or demonic about it. This computer is nothing other than wires, chips and memory cards," said Heero as he continued to sort out Nrobbuts; he'd heard all this before from Duo. Usually Duo had simply hit the wrong button or done something similar so it didn't normally take much for Heero to sort it out. He just wished he could convince his partner that the machine was just that: a machine. He made a mental note to hide Duo's movie '2001 – A Space Odyssey' from the vet for a while, he'd had enough comparisons between Hal and Nrobbuts to last him a lifetime.

"Wires, chips and memory cards that are out to get me," huffed Duo. He turned to face Cathy. "This... 'thing'," he began, "will work perfectly well for anyone whose name is not Duo. Heero never has a problem with it, Hilde can get it to cooperate perfectly; no doubt it will be on its best behavior for you... As soon as it sees me though - forget it. All bets are off and it comes alive. I swear if it could, it would attack me with its mouse."

Catherine couldn't help but laugh, the thought of the vet being attacked by a computer mouse was
just too funny.

"Take no notice of him, Catherine. He likes to be dramatic. There is nothing wrong with the computer at all," stated Heero as he brought the data files back up on the screen. "It's usually something simple such as a wrong button being hit."

Nrobbuts whirred and clicked, saving all the data and glowing smugly.

"That's it!" exclaimed Duo, throwing his hands up into the air. "I refuse to touch that damn thing again. I'm off to the house where at least Gertrude appreciates me." Turning around, Duo marched out of the reception area in a huff.

"Gertrude?" questioned Catherine.

"The washing machine."

"Ah?"

"Don't ask, it's too complicated and I'm sure you will find out soon enough anyway. Now, come here and I'll show you step by step how to get the data logged onto the computer and which files and such it goes into." Heero fixed his attention back on the screen, Catherine joining him.

Up at the house, Duo had collected the laundry and was busy loading it into the machine. "At least you behave yourself, Gertrude," muttered Duo as he added the soap powder, shut the lid and turned the dial. Pulling the button out, the machine began to fill with water. Duo patted it affectionately. "Good girl."

Gertrude gurgled in reply.

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Catherine settled into the practice routine with ease, coping comfortably with the 'secretarial' duties and proving to be an asset to the vets when they needed a hand. Hilde especially hit it off with Catherine and the two became firm friends. Nothing more was said about Duo's 'episode' with Nrobbuts but the long haired vet avoided the computer at all costs. He would glare balefully at it from time to time and refuse to touch it unless absolutely necessary; and only then if he'd crossed himself several times and said at least four Hail Marys. Not that Duo was a religious person by nature but he liked to have all bases covered.

Heero had taken his list of shows with him to Treize's but the pair hadn't had a chance to sit down together and discuss the proposed list until several days later. During a break between schooling horses, Heero brought up the topic of shows and what he'd outlined for the season. Treize fetched his own schedules and the pair went through them together. Treize was impressed with the list that Heero had drawn up, noting how he'd incorporated a few shows that all the horses could compete in. Going over the list and comparing it with what Treize had selected, the pair worked out a possible, final list.

The number of events originally planned for Sandrock and Taurus was cut back slightly, but Treize didn't interfere with what Heero had planned for Zero, after all the horse belonged to Heero and Treize knew the young rider was keen to qualify for the short list for the Nations Cup. Treize was hoping to get Tall Geese selected and if the horse continued to improve the way he was, there was no reason why he shouldn't stand a chance.

Given the 'green' [1] status of both Taurus and Sandrock, Treize thought it best to keep the younger horses' number of competitions to a few less than what Heero had suggested. Not that Treize had any
doubts about Heero's capabilities, he was more concerned about Taurus and how the horse would react in competition. There was no denying that the animal was hot headed and Treize couldn't get rid of the nigging feeling that the horse was a time bomb just waiting to explode. He hoped that by restricting the horse to fewer competitions it would give Heero, as well as Taurus, a chance to settle into competition. The animal certainly showed great potential, which was why Treize still retained him. As a youngster Taurus had been difficult to handle, not taking to being disciplined too well and while he wasn't vicious, he was definitely strong willed. Treize had the colt gelded when he was eighteen months old in the hope that it might help to quieten the horse; it helped a little, making him a bit easier to handle on the ground.

Scanning through the schedules again, Treize's eyes fell on a schedule for a small show in a neighboring village. He paused and read through the entry form and conditions again. "Have a look at this, Heero," said Treize as he passed over the schedule.

Heero took the paper and glanced over it. "Interesting," he commented.

"Might be a good way to start the season off, give the nags a chance to get their jumping legs," mused Treize. "It's a non graded show from what I can tell so it's not going to affect Taurus or Sandy as far as points go. It would also give us the chance to see exactly what Taurus is likely to do when faced with all the trimmings of a show without too much pressure."

"Sounds like a good idea," replied Heero as he looked at the list of classes available.

"I'd suggest the open Novice AM3 for Sandy and Taurus. What do you think?"

"Hmmm. I'd have to agree. It shouldn't be any higher than what they're currently jumping," said Heero absently as he continued to read through the schedule.

"States here that the course will be a minimum of two foot nine, maximum of three foot six."

"When do the entries close?"

Treize glanced through the show's list of rules and regulations. "It's entry on the day."

"I'm game if you are." Heero did a quick memory search. As far as he could recall that weekend would be Duo's one off so the vet would be able to accompany him. Heero knew how much Duo enjoyed attending the shows with him and was happy to play the part of groom at each show he could make it to.

"There's an Open Jumping class as well, doesn't say anything about being E.F.A. registered so I guess that means anyone can enter. We won't gain any points though if we place."

"Doesn't matter. I'd like to get Zero out and give him a go around, would do him the world of good," said Heero.

"I think I'd take Tall Geese as well."

"So, it's a goer then?"

Treize shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?"

"Great. I'll let Duo know, he's bound to want to come along too."

Treize smiled. "Fine. Let's get this other list finalized and fill out the entries. I can send them all off tomorrow. You got your copy?"
Heero picked up his piece of paper with the season's shows on it. "Right here."

"Good. Now which was the first show?"

The pair spent the remainder of the afternoon filling out the various entry forms with all the details necessary for the shows, double checking they had everything right. Heero left around three, his own entry forms tucked into his diary and filled out. All he needed to do was put the entry fee with them and post them off.

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That evening, Heero informed Duo of the plans for the season's shows, showing the vet the final list that Treize and he had worked out. He also mentioned taking Zero to the show in the neighboring village that Treize had suggested. As predicted, Duo was enthusiastic and offered his help as 'groom'. Heero accepted the offer and sealed it with a kiss.

The next week was spent getting the horses ready for the show, Heero giving Zero some hard work over higher fences while still battling with a strong willed Taurus at Treize's. The final arrangements were made for the show, Heero and Duo would travel down together with Zero; Treize would bring Tall Geese, Taurus Sandrock and Short Duck in his own horse truck and meet the other two at the showgrounds.

Otto, one of Treize's grooms, would accompany Treize and assist with the Khushrenada horses while Heero had Duo to help with Zero. The day before the show saw the usual bustle of activity, Zero had a bath, much to the stallion's disgust, as Heero deemed him to be brown and not gray with all the dirt he'd been rolling in. The car was packed with enough gear to stock a small saddler's shop as well as water bucket, haynet, spare hay and of course; carrots. The float was hitched up, Zero rugged and fed and all that remained was for Heero to put in his boots and jacket.

Both men went to bed early, exhausted from the day's efforts. Duo's consolation was that at least Heero didn't compete in Hacking classes or Dressage; if he did, they would have had to plait Zero's mane as well!

* * *

The day of the show dawned fine, a few clouds graced the sky but the weather promised to be mild. Heero was already up and about when Duo dragged himself from the bed and went through to the kitchen to make breakfast. By the time the eggs were cooked and the toast buttered, Heero had returned from feeding the horses and cleaning out the stables.

"Here," said Duo as Heero came back into the kitchen and sat down at the table. "Get that into you before you go change."

A plate of eggs and toast was put in front of him and Heero smiled. "Thanks," he said as he picked up his cutlery and began to eat.

Duo sat opposite, his own plate in front of him and began to tackle his breakfast with enthusiasm. "Have you put Scythe and Shini out yet?"

"No. I thought I'd leave them in until we're ready to load Zero up."

"Good thinking. I'll go and put them out while you get Zero's floating boots on him," said Duo around a mouthful of toast.

"Thanks, that would be a big help."
"What time is your first class?"

"Eleven. That's the Novice AM3. Zero's class isn't until the afternoon; two, I think it starts. I won't know where in the field I'm jumping until all the entries are in. I hope it's mid field though," replied Heero as he finished mopping up the egg yolk with a piece of toast.

"Treize going to be okay bringing those horses down himself?"

"Yeah. He's bringing Otto with him."

"Right." Duo placed his knife and fork on his empty plate. "I'll take care of the dishes while you get changed," he said as he stood up.

"Okay. I won't be long." Heero kissed the vet and disappeared into the bedroom to change into his shirt, tie and jodhpurs. Duo chuckled softly and washed the dishes.

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Pulling into the show ground, Heero quickly spotted Treize's truck and drove slowly over the grass to park next to it. Duo gave a low whistle of appreciation.

"Nice transport," he said as his eyes raked over the impressive truck.

"It's certainly a piece of work," said Heero. "It transports up to six horses with a small sort of living area up the front."

Duo gazed over the vehicle. It was what was commonly called a 'gooseneck' [2] which meant the transport section attached to a small 'truck'. The back section was rectangular in shape with two ramp doors that dropped down from the side. Inside those ramps you could fit three horses per section; one on the far side, one in the middle and one by the ramp itself; a total of six horses in all. There was a small door to the front of the first ramp and that led to a 'tack room'. Duo could see the bridles, saddles and numerous other items inside. At the front, where the front of the truck went into the 'neck' shape was another door. This was the living area Heero had spoken of.

"Treize uses it mainly when he goes to shows that are quite a distance away. It's cheaper than staying in hotels. You can bunk down in the front and have your horses in the back. It's even got a small kitchen inside," explained Heero as he parked the car and turned the engine off.

Duo made a mental note to check the truck out later. They exited the car and set about getting Zero off the float.

Treize had seen them pull up and stepped out of the 'living compartment' to greet them. "Good to see you made it okay," said Treize as he watched Duo and Heero dropping the ramp and getting Zero off the float.

"Should be a good day," replied Heero. "The ground doesn't appear to be too hard and the weather is fine. You remember Duo, don't you, Treize?"

"Of course. It's a pleasure to see you again, Doctor Maxwell," said Treize as he extended his hand.

Duo took the hand and shook it. "It's good to see you again too, Treize, and please, call me Duo."

"The secretary's tent is over that way," began Treize. "As soon as you're sorted out I suggest we head over there and get these animals entered."
"You go ahead, Heero. I can sort out Zero while you enter," said Duo as he patted the gray's neck.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, he's no trouble."

"Okay. Thanks." Heero squeezed Duo's arm by way of appreciation. He'd much rather have kissed his partner but they were in a public place and same sex relationships were still rather taboo so he didn't dare; plus Treize was around and while Heero didn't think the other rider would have a problem with Heero's sexual orientation, it was a risk he wasn't about to take.

Heero left with Treize to enter the horses and Duo set about making Zero comfortable, removing the float boots and getting the horse a hay net and water bucket. Alongside him, at Treize's truck, Otto was similarly settling the Khushrenada horses. Once Duo was done with Zero he wandered over to meet the groom.

"Hi, I'm Duo."

"Otto. Pleased to meet you," replied the other man as he paused from tying up Tall Geese to shake hands with the vet. A banging noise came from within the trailer. "Okay, okay, hold your horses, I'm coming," the groom muttered.

"Impatient?" Duo said with a laugh.

"You have no idea," replied Otto with a touch of sarcasm as he disappeared into the bowels of the trailer.

There was the sound of scuffling followed by a snort then a grunt. A high pitched whinny followed and then Otto reappeared leading a small pony. Duo's eyes widened and a grin crinkled his mouth. "Don't tell me that's Treize's new jumper?" he snickered.

Otto joined in the mirth, giving a chuckle of his own. "Nah, this is Short Duck, Goose's companion. The pair are just about inseparable. Anywhere Goose goes, Duck has to go too."

"Ahh, so this is the mighty midget Heero was telling me about," said Duo as he approached the mini pony and gave the neck a friendly pat. "Is it true that Tall Geese won't jump unless this pony is around?"

"Yup. Animal won't jump a stick if Duck isn't on the same grounds. I've heard of animals bonding with another but these two take it to the extremes!" stated Otto as he placed a water bucket in front of the pony and then attempted to tie up a hay net for him as well.

Duck did his best to pinch the hay as Otto struggled to tie the net up, shoving and pushing the groom until Otto was close to losing his patience. Duo grabbed the halter and pulled the pony back a bit. "Strong little thing, isn't he?" he said as the pony pulled against him.

"Yeah, he's a headstrong little shit when he wants to be. Thanks." Otto finished tying up the hay net and Duo released the pony. Immediately Duck bulldozed forward and snapped a mouthful of hay.

"He needs a few more lessons in manners if you ask me," grinned Otto but gave the pony's ears a friendly pull.

Duo chuckled and then spotted Heero and Treize returning. "Everything okay?" he asked as the pair stopped at the trailers.
"Yes. All horses are entered and we have about an hour before the Novice class starts," replied Heero. "Don't know the jumping order yet as the entries don't close for another fifteen minutes. They will post it up once all entries are in."

"I think we should walk the course now. By the time we have the jumping order should be up and we will know when to start warming up the nags," said Treize as he gazed across to the ring where brightly colored poles and jump wings glittered in the sunlight.

"Good idea. I'll get my helmet, spurs, jacket and whip then," [3] said Heero and turned to go to the car. "You're going to walk the course with us, aren't you, Duo?"

"Sure," replied Duo.

"Then let's go." Heero removed his coveralls from over the top of his jumping attire and slipped into his jacket. Placing his helmet on his head, he carried his whip and spurs in his hand. The three of them set off for the ring leaving Otto to keep an eye on the horses.

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[1] Green: This is a term used in the equestrian world to describe a horse that hasn't had much experience and is still in the 'education' stages.


[3] It is an E.F.A. ruling that when competitors walk a showjumping course they must be dressed in their riding attire and be either wearing or carrying their helmet and any other accessory (whip, spurs) they intend to use when they compete. Failure to do so can result in elimination.
Despite the fact that the fences were mostly set at three feet, Duo still found them daunting. He listened to Heero and Treize discussing the jumps, angles and best line of approach to each fence as they walked the course. He found it all quite fascinating. He enjoyed the little amount of riding he managed to squeeze in when he had some free time from the practice, and Heero had patiently taught him a great deal more, but when Heero had suggested Duo try jumping, the vet had baulked. He was happy to be able to ride well enough to control the horse and enjoy himself, but he really wasn't interested in learning how to jump; he'd rather leave that side of things up to Heero. No, Duo was quite content to ride around the paddock or in the bushland.

Didn't mean he wasn't interested in the jumping side of things though. He often questioned Heero about the various things he did with Zero while training the horse and getting him fit for the season. He listened avidly as Heero explained the different competitions to him, the basic rules and what was involved in getting Zero qualified and many other little things associated with the world of showjumping. Walking the course with the other two, he found he could follow a lot of their conversation.

Having walked the entire course, Heero stood beside the start flags and went back over it in his head, memorizing each fence, the angles and line he would need to follow. The course was well within the capabilities of both Taurus and Sandrock, his worry was that Taurus would do his usual trick and try to get away from him in-between fences. Heero knew he would need all his skills to keep the animal under control and listening to him. His biggest problem was going to be between fences six and seven. Being what was known as 'related' fences, there was only five strides between the two, five strides for him to have Taurus between hand and leg. If the horse managed to get away from him there, Heero knew they would take a rail down on seven. He would have the opposite problem with Sandrock. Sandy being a lazier horse would need riding on firmly at that point if he was to have enough impulsion to clear fence seven.

Deciding he'd seen enough, Heero turned his back to the course. "Let's see if the jumping order is up yet."

They walked back to the secretary's tent and stopped at the board outside. Heero's jumping class was posted and they three quickly scanned down the list. Whoever had done the draw had been fair and out of a class of fifteen riders, Heero saw that he was jumping fourth with Sandrock and fourteenth with Taurus. "That's not bad," he said to Treize and Duo as they walked back to the horses. "At least I'll have a bit of time between rounds to settle Taurus down."

Treize agreed and went to give Otto a hand to get Sandy and Taurus saddled up ready to warm up. Duo checked Zero. The gray was dozing lightly, resting a hind leg and taking no notice of the bustle around him. Duo gave him a pat and then went to see if he could be of any assistance to the others.

With Sandy and Taurus saddled, Treize mounted Sandrock while Heero took the reins and mounted Taurus. The two horses walked calmly across the grass to a section reserved for the riders to warm up their mounts. Duo and Otto followed, stopping under a large tree and watching from the side lines. Treize and Heero took the horses through the warm up, starting off slowly and as the muscles warmed so they moved up a gait. Twenty minutes later, both horses were deemed 'loose' enough to take a couple of the practice jumps. Heero took Taurus over first while Treize, Otto and Duo watched. Duo's heart was in his mouth as he watched the big liver chestnut fighting for his head. Heero sat the animal quietly, holding hard as Taurus tried to tear the reins through his hands and bolt...
at the fence. The animal seemed to bounce on the spot, Heero remaining calm and doing his best to get the horse to settle enough to take the practice fence.

Treize frowned as he watched. He didn't like the look of Taurus at all. As soon as the horse saw a jump it was as if you threw a switch. Taurus would work reasonably well on the flat and then completely forget all his training the second he saw a fence. Treize had to give Heero his due though. The man had been a skilled rider when he'd joined the stable, with Treize's teaching though, Heero's riding had improved tremendously. Given the right horse, Heero had everything he needed to make it to the top.

Holding Taurus hard, Heero patiently settled the horse as much as he could then allowed the animal to attempt the fence. Taurus bounded up to the fence, eager to be jumping and literally leapt over it with inches to spare. Heero's arms were nearly pulled out of their sockets on landing as he fought to keep Taurus in check.

"Is he always like that?" asked Duo, his voice full of concern.

"He's head strong, yes, but not usually this bad," Treize replied. "I think the show atmosphere has hyped him up a bit more than usual."

"How often has he been out?"

"This is his first show."

"Ah." Duo returned his attention to his lover who was having another 'argument' with the horse.

After another fifteen minutes, Taurus had settled a little bit and wasn't pulling quite as much. Heero decided he'd had enough for the moment and rode over to the tree where the others were watching. "I think that will do him for now," he said as he slipped from the saddle.

Treize nodded and dismounted from Sandrock, handing Heero the reins and taking Taurus' reins in return. Heero mounted Sandy and took him out to tackle the practice jumps, Treize mounted Taurus.

"I'll work him around on the flat, keep him moving and see if I can't settle him a little more before Heero's turn to jump him comes around."

Duo mentally wished the man good luck and then turned his attention back to Heero. Sandrock was a pleasure to watch after the antics of Taurus. The horse was calm, moving placidly to Heero's commands and while he lacked that 'spark' he was obedient and willing. Heero took him around on the flat for a few minutes, gauging the horse's mood before turning towards the first practice fence. Sandrock approached the fence eagerly but not fighting his rider, listening and sizing the fence up. They jumped it cleanly and Sandy came back to hand, collecting himself up as Heero rode him together. Even to Duo's less experienced eye the horse was a good jumper and had a lot of potential. He reminded Duo a lot of Zero, eager and willing to please but Duo could see that Sandy lacked the one thing Zero had - the desire to win.

Heero had spoken of the trait in horses before and now, watching Sandrock, Duo could clearly see what Heero meant with those words. It didn't matter how good the animal was, if it didn't have that 'competitive spirit' then it wouldn't go all the way to the top. Sandy would obviously be a good horse; but he wouldn't be a great showjumper.

The public address system crackled into life and began to call for the riders in Heero class to begin marshaling. Popping the animal over one more jump, Heero settled Sandy to a walk and brought him back to the tree.
"I'd better get going to the collecting ring," he stated as he looked around for Treize.

The silver medallist was working Taurus just over the other side of the warm up area.

"I'll let him know," offered Otto. "You go on ahead."

"Thanks." Heero turned Sandy and began to ride towards the ring, Duo walked beside him. Once they were out of ear shot of Otto, Duo spoke.

"You going to be able to handle that maniae?"

Heero looked down at Duo. "Yeah. He's just high strung and this is his first show, he's bound to be a handful."

"He gives me the willies."

Heero laughed. "He'll be fine. All I need to do is keep him together."

"Rather you than me, buddy. I don't know, Heero, he seems like a stick of dynamite to me, and one with a very short fuse."

"Don't worry, Duo. I can handle him."

Duo wasn't reassured but gave Heero the benefit of the doubt. If Heero thought he could handle the animal then Duo wasn't about to argue. He didn't want to appear to be a mother hen, Heero was a strong man and could look after himself. It didn't mean that Duo had to like it though.

Entering the collecting ring, Heero approached the steward to let him know he was there and then rode to the side where he could watch some of the other competitors and be close to Duo.

"How do you think you'll go? Any ideas on the course?" Duo asked as his eyes followed the current competitor.

"Sandrock should handle it okay. Taurus... He's a different story. The biggest problem that I can see will be between fences six and seven. I'll need to keep Sandy well together for that one, Taurus too."

"Number eight? Number eight?"

"I'm number eight," Heero said as he turned to the steward.

"Ah, you're next so don't go anywhere." The steward ticked Heero's number off on his list

"Good luck, Heero." Duo squeezed Heero's calf.

Heero gave his partner a warm smile. "Thanks."

"You in next?"

At the sound of Treize's voice, Heero spun around. He'd not heard the other man approach. "Yeah."

"Just take it easy, there's a generous time allowed so there's no need to push it. Aim for going clear and we can worry about a jump off if and when it happens," Treize said with a confident smile.

"Number eight? In you go."

Heero pushed his helmet further onto his head, collected his reins and walked Sandrock through the
entrance and into the ring. He spotted the judge and rode over to salute. The bell rang and Heero was cantering through the start flags. Standing on the side lines, Duo held his breath.

Sandrock listened to his rider, collecting himself together and clearing the first fence. "Good, boy," murmured Heero and stroked the satiny neck briefly before riding on to the second fence. The second, third and fourth fences were cleared in similar fashion, Sandrock remaining calm and jumping cleanly. Landing over the fifth fence, Heero turned and lined the horse up for the sixth obstacle. Heero knew he had to have his horse together on landing to successfully clear fence seven. Sandy cocked back an ear as Heero used his voice as well as his seat and legs to steady and balance the horse. Three strides away, Heero gave the chestnut his head and Sandrock soared over the fence. As forelegs touched the ground so Heero was there, riding the animal together in readiness for the next jump.

They timed it beautifully, Sandrock came in on the correct stride and launched himself into the air, clearing the fence easily. The rest of the course was simple enough. They sailed over the wall, cleared the triple and took the double in their stride. Passing through the finish flags, Heero gave the sweating neck a couple of pats. "Good boy, that was perfect."

In the collecting ring, Duo let out a relieved breath of air and released the tip of his braid. He hadn't remembered holding on to it. His face wore a big grin as Heero returned to them and he was quick to congratulate his partner. "Well done, Heero. That was a great round."

Heero smiled in return. "He was a good boy."

"Nicely ridden," commented Treize. "He jumped beautifully."

"Thanks."

"I'll take him if you like," Otto said as he reached for Sandrock's reins.

"Thanks." Heero dismounted and took Taurus from Treize. "If this idiot will keep his mind on me when we're out there he should also make it through to the jump off."

"Just be careful, Heero. I don't expect much from either of these two at this stage. This show is more for experience than anything, having gotten through to the jump off with Sandrock is reward enough."

"I'll be happy if Taurus listens to me for some of the course," replied Heero as he mounted the animal.

"How many more to go before you're in again, Heero?" Duo asked.

"Eight. Anyone know how many are through to the jump off so far?"

"Two of you so far," said Treize.

"Right." Heero rode away to keep Taurus moving and figure out his best strategy for keeping the horse under control when in the ring.

Time passed quickly and before Heero knew it, he was being called back to the collecting ring.

"You're next," said the steward as he again ticked Heero off his list.

Duo stepped alongside the big chestnut and checked the girth for Heero. He couldn't help but see the lines of tension in Heero's face, the rigid set of the man's jaw and it did nothing to quell the growing
knot of apprehension forming in Duo's gut. "Be careful, Heero," he said softly. "Stay in one piece. I need you."

Hearing the soft words, Heero leaned over Taurus' shoulder to be a little closer to Duo. "I promise I won't take any risks," replied Heero in his gentle voice. The steward was calling his number and as Heero straightened up he mouthed; "I love you," and rode off into the ring.

Just to the side, Treize couldn't help but witness the exchange and his brow furrowed. He'd pondered over the relationship between the rider and the vet, but never been given any indication that the pair were anything more than good friends, coworkers and house mates. He knew Heero worked for the vet, keeping the books and filling in as assistant come receptionist and that Duo had offered the accountant a place to stay. He'd had an idea that there may have been more to it but never questioned Heero. What the rider did in his own time was his business and nothing to do with Treize. Just so long as Heero showed up to work, rode and schooled the horses to the best of his ability then Treize didn't give a damn if the man was straight, gay or bisexual.

It looked as if gay was pretty much a safe bet though. Treize smiled inwardly. It didn't matter to him, he was bisexual but kept it a hidden fact. He could certainly sympathize with the pair if that was the case and they were in a relationship; society was pretty narrow minded. Treize had to admit that Heero had taste. The vet was certainly easy on the eyes, handsome with a quicksilver mind, strength of character as well as body and a charming personality. He was also an excellent vet judging by the snippets he'd heard around the place from satisfied clients of Doctor Maxwell's. No, if Heero and the vet were partners in the romantic sense, then Treize wished them all the best. Hearing the bell ring, Treize returned his attention to the horse and rider in the ring.

Duo was on tenterhooks, His stomach was churning and he was biting his nails. Hastily he grabbed the end of his braid and resisted the temptation to chew on that. In the ring he could see that Heero had his hands full as the liver chestnut fought against him.

Saluting the judge, Heero waited for the bell and once it had rung, he headed for the start. Beneath him Taurus tensed, every muscle coming alive as he began to pull and fight for his head. Heero sat calmly, a firm grip on the reins as he pushed the horse forward and held the energy with his hands. They passed through the start flags and were boring down on the first fence a little faster than Heero would have liked, but not fast enough for Taurus. They cleared it easily, Taurus flicking his tail as he sailed over.

The second fence came all too soon and Heero had to sit down hard. Taurus was trying to get away from him but Heero knew that could be dangerous so he used all his skill to keep the animal together and in check. Landing over the second jump, Taurus shook his head and plunged forward. He didn't like being restrained, he wanted to jump.

"Easy you idiot," growled Heero as he steadied Taurus. They would be coming up on fences six and seven in a moment and if Taurus wasn't listening then Heero knew they would collect faults.

The third, fourth and fifth fences passed in a blur, before Heero knew it, they were aiming for fence six and Taurus was pulling like a train. He managed to steady the horse and they cleared jump six. Upon landing, Taurus gave a huge buck, unseating Heero and throwing him on Taurus' neck. The reins slipped through his fingers and Taurus took immediate advantage.

In the collecting ring, Duo watched, his heart in his mouth as Taurus bucked. "Shit!" He watched, helpless as Heero was thrown against the horse's neck, somehow managing to scramble back into his saddle and stay on the horse; but the damage was done. Taurus had snatched the reins and was galloping towards fence seven. Duo shut his eyes.
Treize also watched, the fear for the rider and anger at the horse rising in his gut with each second. He trusted Heero would be all right and stay with the horse, but he could see from the way the horse was approaching fence seven he was going to be in trouble.

Knowing there wasn't much he could do, Heero shoved himself back into the saddle and grappled with the now loose reins. He managed to get them back but didn't have any time in which to bring the horse back to hand or balance him for the jump. The speed in which Taurus was approaching left Heero with no doubt the animal wouldn't clear the jump. All the energy had been spent in the tear away gallop, there was nothing left to propel him over the jump.

Taurus checked as the fence appeared in front of him, his striding was wrong but he jumped anyway. Taking off from a good stride and a half away, the horse pushed his hind legs underneath him and flew into the air. Given how far away from the jump he'd taken off, Taurus stretched his body, desperately reaching for the far side of the poles. Had the fence been a simple upright, he probably would have made it - but it wasn't. It was a spread fence. Poles at the fore and identical poles a good three foot spread behind.

Heero took a chunk of mane in his hands, knowing they were heading for disaster and not wanting to hit the turf. He felt the desperate reach as the horse stretched to try and clear the back poles, but knew it was fruitless. Taurus came back to earth right in the middle of the back poles, sending the poles, jump wings and decorative plant pots flying in all directions.

Taurus pecked and stumbled on landing, his muzzle hitting the dirt before he scrambled to get his legs underneath him. Heero hung onto the mane as the horse lurched and went down on his knees, staying with him by sheer luck than anything else. As Taurus righted himself, Heero let go of the mane and took up the reins again, pushing his legs on and bringing Taurus back together. Fence eight was looming and Heero needed to get Taurus balanced and going forward again if they were to clear it.

Taurus had other plans though. Sending the previous jump flying had rattled the big chestnut and he wasn't happy. He fought against Heero as they approached the next fence. Five strides away, Taurus spotted the jump and slammed on the brakes, shooting Heero up his neck in the process.

Heero pushed back into the saddle, collected his wits and reins, then turned Taurus around in preparation to try the jump again.

Back in the collecting ring, Duo had cracked open one eye when he heard the crashing of poles, not sure if he wanted to witness what was happening but knowing he had to see if Heero was okay. Beside him, Treize swore. Duo looked at the man. "Difficult horse, isn't he?"

"You're not kidding. He's a menace. Damn thing just doesn't want to listen. Fuck!"

Duo's head swiveled back to the ring where Hero was halfway up Taurus' neck and the horse had stopped.

"That's the first time he's ever refused a jump," Treize said in an amused tone. "I'd say he's a little upset."

"Looks to me like he's throwing a temper tantrum," replied Duo as he watched his lover turn the horse around and present him to the fence again.

Taurus jogged, bucked and tossed his head. He swung his quarters and cantered sideways towards the jump. Heero tried everything he knew to straighten the horse up and bring him in square but Taurus wouldn't listen. He stopped again. The bell rang and Heero turned Taurus towards the
collecting ring. As he exited so he rode over to where Treize, Duo and Otto waited.

"Sorry," he said to Treize as he dismounted and began to check the horse over for injuries. Duo was there before him though, skilled hands running the length of the chestnut's legs.

"There is no need to apologize, Heero. You did nothing wrong. This damn excuse for a horse is the one that's at fault. Too impatient."

"No, I should have been more in tune with him, anticipated what he was going to do."

"Well, the good news is, he's not damaged. A couple of minor cuts and scrapes but nothing serious," interrupted Duo.

"Thank you, Doctor Maxwell. I appreciate you taking a look at him," said Treize and then turned back to Heero. "We will talk more about this animal and his future on Wednesday when you come to the stables. Otto? Please, take Taurus back to the truck and see to him. Heero has to walk the jump off course in a moment."

"Hell! I'd forgotten about Sandy."

Duo chuckled from the side. "You may have been the comic relief with Taurus, but now it's back to the serious shit with the jump off."

Heero gave a snort. "I do not do comic relief."

"Could have fooled me."

"I hate to interrupt but we had best go walk the jump off course," mused Treize.

"Good idea." Heero gave his partner a smile. "Be right back, Duo."

* * *

A total of five horses had made it through to the jump off and Heero was second to go. The course was shorter, only fences one, four, seven, eight and ten being included. It was also against the clock. Heero mounted Sandy, the horse feeling like he was half asleep after the enthusiasm of Taurus, and did a couple of practice jumps. Heero had decided to try for another clear round and not worry about the clock. He didn't want to push Sandrock, better to take it slow and steady at this stage of the horse's education.

The first rider in the jump off came out with four faults, having pushed a little too hard for a good time and paying the penalty. Heero entered and started off slow, giving Sandrock a chance to find his rhythm. They cruised around, clearing fence after fence, Heero giving the horse plenty of room and bringing him in with the best possible approach to each fence. They came out with a clear round but a slow time of 58.37 seconds.

Treize was happy with the chestnut's performance and congratulated Heero on a job well done. They waited in the collecting ring for the other three riders to finish their rounds and at the end of it, Heero had placed third. He mounted and went into the ring to receive his rosette.

Returning to the truck with Sandrock and a happy Treize, Otto took over, unsaddling and making Sandy comfortable. They had to wait for the open junior jumping class before their next event so Duo convinced Heero to pay a visit to the canteen with him and get something to eat. On the way there, Duo suddenly pulled Heero into the toilets. The toilets were vacant and Duo quickly shoved Heero into one of the stalls and shut the door behind them.
Once the door was closed, Duo wrapped his arms around Heero and kissed him soundly. Heero was a little stunned but quick to reciprocate, enjoying the stolen moment. Duo rested his head against Heero's shoulder and sighed. "You scared the shit outta me, Heero."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"I know. Just be careful, okay? I love you, Heero. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Heero pulled his lover close and ran soothing hands along the vet's back. He didn't realize he'd scared Duo this much. "I promise to be careful."

"Good." Duo nuzzled Heero's throat. "I don't trust that horse, Heero."

"He's not vicious, just young and head strong. He'll be okay with work."

"I suppose you're right. You know more about horses than I do, but..." Duo pulled away a little and stared deep into Heero's eyes. "I can't help this feeling I have inside that Taurus is going to be trouble and you're going to be the one to come out hurt."

"There's always a risk when riding, Duo. You know that."

"Yeah, I know and I'm sorry if I appear to be mothering you. I don't mean too. I know you can handle him. Look, forget I said anything."

"I think it's sweet that you're concerned for me," said Heero as he reached for Duo's lips and kissed the vet.

"Mmmm. I like your kind of reassurance."

"Want me to reassure you some more?"

"Yes, please."

They continued to kiss for a few more minutes, oblivious to everything going on outside. Fortunately, no one came into the 'gents' so they were able to make their exit without suspicion. They continued to the canteen where Duo bought himself and Heero lunch, a salad sandwich for Heero and a meat pie for Duo. Strolling back towards the truck and float, they stopped to watch some of the juniors competing on their ponies and finish their lunch. Reluctantly they dragged themselves away to go and get Zero ready. They'd taken a look at the jumping order for the Open class. There had only been ten entries, Treize was jumping eighth, Heero third.

Arriving back at the horses, Duo set about getting Zero ready while Heero went to let Treize know the jumping order.

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tbc....
Chapter 9

Duo finished brushing Zero and went to fetch the horse's jumping boots. He put them on, securing the buckles and checking that they weren't too tight. With the boots fitted correctly, Duo went to fetch Zero's saddle, placing the saddle blanket on first, then the saddle and sliding it back into the correct position as Heero had taught him. Happy with the saddle's position, Duo did up the girth, remembering that Zero liked to blow out his tummy a bit. He secured it for the moment. He'd check it again in a couple of minutes, no doubt it would go up another three or four holes. Just as Duo was fetching the bridle so Heero and Treize returned.

"What's the course like?" asked Duo as he paused, bridle in hand.

"Not too bad. Only one tricky part and that's the gate, it's got a false ground line," replied Heero as he checked Zero's girth, pulling it up a couple of holes.

"False ground line?" echoed Duo.

"Yeah. It's an old trick. The jump is set so it appears to the horse that the ground line, or place where the horse will judge its take off point from is in the correct position when in fact it isn't. It's a clever trick to sort out the educated from the non-educated. By that I mean the horse will need to listen to and trust his rider to place him in the right spot to take off."

"Ah. Sneaky then?"

"Yup, you could say that. If the horse is the type that picks its own take off point then he's going to find himself in trouble as he will be too far away to clear the fence."

"What does Treize think?" Duo began to put the bridle on Zero while Heero checked his spurs and did his helmet strap up.

"He likes it. It shouldn't pose any problem to Goose, Zero either for that matter."

Duo gave a snicker and Heero looked up, the question in his eyes. "I was just thinking..."

"Oh, yeah?"

"The pair of you are in the same class but there can only be one winner. What happens if you beat Treize? It's not gonna look all that good for the employee to beat the boss."

Heero laughed. "Actually it wouldn't matter. If I beat Treize then it shows what a good teacher he is. If he wins then he's still happy."

"Makes sense I suppose."

Heero checked the girth again before pulling down his stirrups and mounting. Zero felt light, bouncy and yet completely under control after Taurus and Sandrock. The gray's ears swiveled around, taking in the sounds around him. Liquid brown eyes sparkled and nostrils flared as Zero walked with easy strides to the warm up area.

Duo followed along behind, having let Treize know they were going to warm up the gray. Treize had acknowledged and replied he'd be along shortly with Goose. Settling under his tree again, Duo
watched Heero start his warm up, occasionally dragging his eyes away from his lover to see how the other horses and riders around were doing. Duo guessed that some of them were in the same class as Heero and he amused himself by trying to pick out who Heero's competition would be and what sort of threat they might pose to Zero and his chances of finishing in the top three. Treize arrived and went to warm up Goose, Otto parked himself with Duo and the two exchanged conversation on their respective 'charges'.

Having warmed up enough on the flat, Heero turned the gray towards the practice jumps. Zero's ears were pricked, his attention on the jump and his rider. Long strides ate up the ground as Zero approached the jump and with a whisk of his tail, cleared it effortlessly. Heero stroked the strong neck and brought the horse around for another jump. Again Zero cleared the fence with ease, his eyes shining with his obvious love of jumping. Having completed another five practice jumps, all with ease, Heero brought the gray to a walk and headed for the tree and his partner.

Bringing Zero to a halt, Heero patted the horse. Zero immediately began to search Duo's pockets for carrots, soft wuffling noises coming from him as he smelt his favorite treat.

Digging into his pocket, Duo produced the sought after carrot and fed it to Zero. "There you go, piggy. Guess you think you've earned that."

Zero just looked at the vet with a smug expression on his face as if to say 'I know I'm good,' and then proceeded to search Duo's person for more carrots.

"He sure loves those," chuckled Otto.

"That's an understatement," replied Duo. "Give this horse a carrot and he's your friend for life."

Otto laughed and petted the big gray. "He's a nice horse, Heero."

"Thanks. I think he's the best, but then again, I'm rather biased."

The public address system crackled into life, calling for all competitors in the Open Jumping to present to the collecting ring.

Treize and Heero rode towards the ring, Duo and Otto walking a little way behind. Duo made a side visit to the horse float to collect more carrots, Zero having cleaned him out earlier. He caught up with Heero just as the first competitor was entering the ring. They stood and watched as the girl rode the course, taking it at a very slow pace.

"If she doesn't increase her impulsion that horse is going to pull a few rails," said Treize as he watched the bay 'crawl' up to the brush fence. The horse cleared it; but only just. Jumping the next fence, Treize's prediction came true, the horse knocking the top rail off with his forelegs. The girl seemed to ride the bay on more after that but they still knocked down a couple more rails and finished the course with twelve faults.

The next rider to go was an older woman on a brown thoroughbred. The horse started off well but looked a little out of its league as it got further around the course and the jumps increased in height. To Duo, it looked like the horse hadn't been jumping these heights for very long. Heero voiced his suspicions.

"That horse has only just been upgraded to B grade."

"Looks like it too," replied Treize. "It could have done with staying in C grade for a bit longer."

"I think she's only got it out today to see if it can cope with the higher heights."
"It's got potential, but I think she should apply to the E.F.A. to have it remain in C grade for another season, by that stage it should be experienced enough to cope with B grade courses."

"I agree," replied Heero as the brown refused the wall.

Duo glanced at Otto who gave him a grin. "I think they've forgotten we're here."

"Shit! That was lucky," exclaimed Treize as the brown jumped the wall on its second attempt but sent the top two layers of 'bricks' flying and stumbled on landing.

The woman, obviously realizing her horse wasn't happy, pulled the animal up and doffed her helmet to the judge.

"Smart move," said Heero.

"What was?" asked Duo, he couldn't tell what the woman was doing.

"She's retiring from the competition. She's realized her horse is having problems and rather than keep pushing him and risk the horse having an accident or losing his nerve, she's taking him out of the competition," replied Heero.

"Ah."

"Number eight? Number eight?"

"Heero, that's you," said Duo as he heard the marshal calling Heero's number.

"Shit! Duo, could you check my girth please?"

Duo quickly checked Zero's girth and wished his partner good luck. With a look of determination in his eye, Heero entered the ring.

Saluting the judge, Heero headed for the start flags, Zero fresh and eager beneath him. "Take it easy, boy. This one's for practice more than anything. The serious shows start in another couple of weeks."

Zero gave a snort and tossed his head.

The bell rang and Heero rode through the start and was on his way. Back in the collecting ring, Duo watched nervously. He couldn't help it. Every time Heero competed, Duo would get the jitters for him. Treize watched the long haired vet, noting the slightly agitated state of the man as Heero began his course. It served to continue to fuel his suspicions about the pair. Treize knew his curiosity would win out in the end so he made a mental note to ask Heero about his relationship with Duo when they got together to discuss Taurus and his future on the Wednesday.

"He's going well so far," remarked Otto.

Treize turned his attention back to the pair in the ring, Heero was approaching fence four and all clear so far. The big gray collected himself together and hopped over the parallel bars with ease, his ears cocked and looking for the next jump.

Heero was enjoying himself. Zero was going beautifully, willing but responsive to his slightest touch. So far the fences hadn't given the horse any problems and Heero could feel the animal was enjoying himself as well. They cleared the brush fence then turned and lined up for the double. The first element loomed before them and with a soft grunt, Zero cleared it, landing and getting his hind quarters underneath himself for the second element. Two strides and the gray was in the air again,
sailing over the second element. The upright rails were next and then Zero was heading for the wall.

* * *

Short Duck had finished off his hay net, vacuumed up all the wisps that had dropped out onto the ground and was now, bored. To the side of him, Taurus stood pulling at his own hay net, on the other side, Sandrock dozed, resting a hind leg, eyes shut and half full haynet still hanging. Duck sidled over, intent on pinching the chestnut's hay only to be brought up short by the lead rope. Frustrated, the mini pony tossed his head and pulled, stretching his neck as far as he could. He was still a good foot away from the tempting hay net and not likely to get any closer. Not the type to give up easily, Duck turned back to the rope that held him and began to nibble on it, grasping it in his teeth and pulling from time to time.

Horses are quite intelligent creatures, mini ponies in particular are very smart. Whoever said that horses were stupid had never met Short Duck. Whilst he might be short in stature, Duck was certainly not lacking in brain capacity. He chewed and tugged on the rope for a bit, relieving a little of his boredom before trying once more to reach Sandy's hay net. The rope though, still held him in check. Duck went back to tugging the rope with his teeth, only this time he pulled on the trailing end. Treize always had his horses tied up using a quick release knot. That way if the horse got into trouble all you had to do was pull on the trailing end and the knot would completely undo. Unfortunately for Treize, Duck found this out. Pulling on the rope, the knot slipped free and Duck suddenly discovered, much to his delight, that he could now reach the tempting hay net, even if he did have to stretch his neck upwards rather a lot.

Happily, Duck munched away, flattening his ears in threat when Sandrock tried to protest the loss of his hay. With the hay now all gone, Duck began to scrounge around for more food. He didn't find anything more around the trailer and with his newfound freedom, decided to do a little exploring. He wondered where his mate was and flared his nostrils, testing the wind and seeing if he could pick up the scent of Goose. He found it and with a toss of his head, set off to find his mate.

* * *

Zero cleared the wall with ease and turned to make the run into the gate. "Tricky one this time, my son," muttered Heero.

Zero cocked back an ear and felt the subtle shift of his rider's weight. A light touch to the bit in his mouth alerted Zero that something new was coming, the gentle pressure of legs against his sides combined with the light restraint on the bit in his mouth and Zero shortened his stride.

"Easy," said Heero.

Zero could see the gate ahead and was eager to jump it. He'd lined it up in his sight but waited for his master's signal. Legs came firmly against his side and Zero bounded forwards, listening to the signals from his rider and ignoring his own pre-determined take off point. The fence disappeared from Zero's sight but the horse relied on his master to keep him safe. Another push from his rider's legs and Zero lengthened out, a third push and the big gray gathered himself together, hind legs coming right underneath his body and propelling him into the air.

Treize whistled through his teeth. "Bloody nice jump!"

Duo couldn't help but grin. The partnership between horse and rider never ceased to amaze him.

Zero cleared the last two fences in the same, effortless fashion and passed between the finish flags to the sound of applause from the spectators and the public address system stating that rider number
eight had a clear round.

As soon as Zero entered the collecting ring he began his search of Duo's person, politely asking for the carrots he knew the nice man would have for him. He knew he'd been good, his master's voice and the petting he'd gotten told him that much, but he wanted his reward.

Duo didn't disappoint the gray. The muzzle tickled as it roamed over Duo's upper torso searching for the carrots. Gently, Duo pushed the horse’s face away and dipped into his pocket, producing two carrots which were eaten with enthusiasm.

"Good round," said Otto as he patted the gray.

"Very nicely done, Heero. You've set the challenge now," stated Treize with a smile.

"It's not that hard a course if your horse listens to you," replied Heero. "Zero was great, he did everything I asked him to so I'm pleased."

"You're a good boy, aren't you, Zero?" Duo continued to make a fuss of the horse and feed him carrots, despite the slobber and mess the gray was making.

Heero dismounted and loosened the girth. Moving to stand next to Duo, Heero brushed against the vet and gave him a smile. He was longing to take Duo in his arms and hug him but it would have to wait. Maybe they could make another visit to the 'gents' before they left; purely for the call of nature of course.

Having finished feeding Zero the carrots, they turned their attention back to the ring and the other competitors.

* * *

Short Duck could catch whiffs of his mate's scent on the breeze and headed in the general direction of the ring. He paused from time to time to scavenge around a deserted float, cleaning up hay or feed whenever he found it. A couple of times he'd approached a float where a horse was tied up and attempted to help himself to that animal's feed only to be chased away by teeth or hooves from a none too happy horse.

The scent of his mate was getting stronger as Duck drew ever closer to the collecting ring.

* * *

Treize was next to go, Otto checking Goose's girth and jumping boots while Treize watched the competitor before him attack the course with gusto. An amused smile graced his lips as the horse in the ring, a bay, was motoring fast around the jumps. He cleared everything in his path but Treize didn't think they would be too much in the way of a threat to Heero in the jump off. The horse wouldn't be able to keep that sort of speed up without coming to grief somewhere along the line. Thundering through the finish, the public address system announced another clear round making a total of four so far including Heero's.

"Good luck, boss." Otto patted the bay's neck.

"Yeah. Good luck, Treize," said Duo with a friendly smile.

"Show us all how it should be done," added Heero.

Treize gave them a mock salute and then entered the ring.
Duo hadn't seen Treize jump all that much, he was usually too busy helping Heero with Zero so his viewing time was fairly limited. This time though, they were all there together and with Heero holding his horse, Duo was free to watch. He had to admit the pair were striking together. Goose with his muscular, compact body moved effortlessly across the grass towards the judge. Treize sat the horse with a natural grace, his slender body fitting perfectly with the animal and even to an experienced person, the pair oozed class and confidence.

"He should do all right," said Heero as he watched the bay break into a canter and head for the start flags.

Otto and Duo declined to comment, both absorbed in watching the horse and rider.

Starting off slowly, Treize gradually increased his pace as Tall Geese settled into his rhythm. Jump after jump was cleared in Goose's effortless style and soon the pair were approaching the double. Treize balanced his horse, sitting deep into his saddle and driving Goose's hocks underneath the animal thus ensuring he had the impulsion needed to clear both obstacles. Goose took the first element, landed, took two strides and launched himself into the air for the second element. Hooves bit deep into the grass as Goose landed and got himself back together again.


Goose approached the gate, Treize asking the horse for his full attention and Goose giving it. Treize had picked out his take off point and brought the horse in on the perfect stride. The big bay flew into the air and cleared the gate with inches to spare. The remaining two jumps were easily cleared and Treize left the ring with a clear round and putting him into the jump off.

Riding into the collecting ring, Treize was congratulated by the 'cheer squad' and accepted the praise with grace, patting his horse and making a fuss of the animal. Duo produced a carrot for Goose, much to Zero's indignation. Those were his carrots and Zero didn't care much for them being given to the 'opposition'. He let it be known too with a sharp nudge to Duo's back.

"I think Zero is jealous," remarked Treize.

"He's just greedy," came Duo's reply as he turned around to confront the gray. "You're a piglet, aren't you, Zero?" he said as he pulled the gray ears affectionately.

Zero gave him another nudge and a hopeful look.

"No, no more carrots until you finish your jumping. You don't need the extra weight, you already have enough to carry." teased Duo.

Hearing the words, Heero's head snapped around. "I am not that heavy!"

"I never said you were," snickered Duo. "You were the one that said it."

Heero chewed on that for a moment and realized he wasn't going to win this argument, so he changed the subject. "What was the jump off course?"

Treize laughed and gave Duo the thumbs up before turning back to Heero and his question. The friendly banter between the pair was certainly amusing.

The remaining two riders completed their courses, one scoring eight faults and the other four for a refusal which meant neither one went through to the jump off. The officials raised the jumps that were being used for the jump off and gave the competitors five minutes to walk the course. Treize and Heero walked it together, exchanging comments and ideas on which was the best way to tackle
it. Returning to the collecting ring, Heero tightened Zero's girth and mounted. He was first to go in the jump off, Treize was last and technically speaking, had the advantage.

Heero's jaw was set with determination, he was going to give this his best shot, hopefully go clear and give the others something really fast time wise to chase. Duo recognized the look in his partner's eye and casually rested a hand on Heero's calf. Heero looked down at the contact and met with cheerful amethyst.

"Go for it, Heero," Duo said quietly and then mouthed, 'Love you.'

Leaning down on the pretense of adjusting his spur, Heero whispered in Duo's ear. "Love you too," then as he straightened he gave Duo's ear a quick lick, sending shivers down Duo's spine.

The marshal called Heero's number and the young accountant entered the ring, Zero full of bounce and eager to jump beneath him. Saluting the judge, Heero rode for the start, the bell went and they were off.

Back in the collecting ring, Duo's eyes darted continuously from his boyfriend to the clock and back again, watching the seconds tick by as Zero cleared fence after fence.

Jumps one, three and four all passed beneath the gray horse as he sailed over them with ease. The double was next and Zero came into it perfectly, clearing both elements, his ears pricked and looking for the next fence. Heero had decided to take a risk here and hoped it would pay off. He only had the wall and the gate to go and if he brought Zero in on a forty-five degree angle to the wall it should put him within five strides of the gate and not eight if he was to take it center on and without the angle. Riding Zero together, he collected the horse and sent him at the wall.

"Cheeky bugger," mused Treize.

"Huh?" asked Duo, his eyes still on the horse as it jumped the wall on what appeared to be a very acute angle to Duo.

"By angling the wall he has fewer strides to the gate and saves precious seconds."

"Ah." Duo's eyes looked at the timer again.

Zero jumped the wall, landed and then took five strides to the gate, trusting his master and the aids he was getting. He leapt over the gate, landed and then feeling his master's legs hard on his sides, urging him on, Zero bolted for the finish flags. They flashed through them, Heero looking at the clock as he began to pull his horse up.

43.27 seconds was registered in bold, red lights of the electronic clock.

Feeling pleased with himself and his horse, Heero rode out of the ring and over to where Duo was almost bouncing on the spot with excitement.

Zero didn't have to beg for carrots this time, Duo had them waiting for the gray and happily stuffed Zero's mouth with as many as the gray could handle.

"Well done, Heero. That's a great time!" said Duo as he resisted the urge to hug his lover, settling for placing his arm over Heero's shoulders instead in a friendly 'buddy' gesture.

"Nice take on the wall, Heero. You've certainly set one scorcher of a time to beat," stated Treize, one eye on Heero and one on the ring where the next rider was trying to emulate Heero's round but coming to grief when his horse couldn't make the angle over the wall.
"Thanks. That should sort the men from the boys," replied Heero with a grin.

The next two riders also tried to copy Heero's round, one succeeded but in a slower time, the other knocked down the gate and accrued four faults. Then it was Treize's turn.

"Good luck, Treize," said Duo as the former silver medalist prepared to enter the ring.

"Good luck, old man. See if you can beat me," Heero cheekily said with a grin, throwing down the gauntlet.

"Old man?" Treize questioned. "I'll show you I'm no has been, Yuy." With that, Treize rode into the ring to present to the judge.

* * *

Short Duck ambled towards the collecting ring. Occasionally he trod on the trailing rope and gave himself a jerk but for the most part he managed to miss the rope with his hooves. As he drew closer to the ring though, more people were around and it didn't take long for one of them to spot the loose pony and attempt to catch him.

Duck sidestepped the human, he wasn't about to be caught for no-one. He wanted to find his mate and with his newfound freedom, he was intent on doing just that. The human was persistent though and tried again. Duck snorted and trotted off to the side. Another person joined in, then another and another, all of them trying to corner the pony and grab the trailing rope.

Giving a loud squeal, Duck dodged their grasping hands, bounced into a canter and weaved through the people as fast as his little legs would carry him leaving havoc in his wake. He propped, turned, swerved and generally managed to evade those that tried to catch him. He shot underneath a large Clydesdale causing the heavy horse to jump, almost landing on top of its handler. Duck charged behind a couple of ponies, both animals shying and nearly losing their young riders.

Duck was getting desperate and beginning to panic. He wanted his mate, not all these people trying to grab him. Barely managing to avoid a kick from a fancy show hack, Duck propped and changed direction, sticking his head into the air and neighing loudly for his companion as he continued to gallop around in a blind panic.

Goose was coming up on the wall, Treize having brought the bay in on the same angle as Heero had and confident his horse would make the jump okay. Three strides away, Treize applied the leg and Goose lengthened stride. From the sidelines there came a disturbance but Treize ignored it, as did Goose, their attention focused solely on the wall when a high-pitched neigh broke the air.

Hearing the neigh, Goose faltered, his attention taken from the jump and he neighed back. Although his attention only wavered for a second or two it was enough to disrupt the approach and Goose found himself facing a jump he hadn't a hope of clearing now. Gamely he pulled his hindquarters underneath him and pushed himself up.

Feeling his horse falter and then neigh in answer, Treize knew he'd lost the momentum they needed to get over the wall. His mind registered it was Duck who'd neighed but the damage was done. Treize did his best to give Goose all the assistance he could to get over the wall as he silently promised the mini pony a painful reprimand.

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Chapter 10

In the collecting ring, Otto, Heero and Duo heard the shrill neigh and commotion behind. Hearing Goose neigh in answer and then falter, they all knew who was responsible.

"Shit!" Otto said as he spun around.

"Fuck!" added Duo as his legs began to automatically move.

"Damn!" groaned Heero as he watched Goose's futile attempt to clear the wall.

Otto and Duo sprinted across the collecting ring as Duck charged in. The pony's eyes were wild, his head held high as he searched for his mate. The rest of the competitors in the ring moved to the side, keeping their horses out of the way while spectators and grooms alike tried to catch the panicked pony.

Nostrils flaring, Duck dodged a couple of people, trod on the trailing lead rope and gave himself a sharp tug on his halter. The tug only slowed him down for a second, but it was enough time for Duo and Otto to close in. Duo grabbed for the trailing rope as Otto went for Duck's halter.

"Whoa, you silly pony," Otto said as he hung on and pulled Duck around.

"Steady," Duo soothed as he pulled on the lead rope to assist Otto in bringing the pony to a halt.

Duck was forced to slow his pace as his head was pulled around and the lead rope tightened. The calm tones of the two voices penetrated his mind as his nostrils caught the familiar scent of Otto and Duck came to a trembling halt.

Otto gently soothed the frightened pony, stroking the sweaty neck and speaking in a low, calm voice.

Duo ran an expert eye over the short legs and body, relieved to see there were no visible signs of damage. "He looks okay," said Duo as he handed the lead rope to Otto who had managed to settle the pony.

"I guess that's one small blessing. I'd say the damage will come after Treize gets a hold of him." Otto turned to the ring entrance to see his boss aiming for the exit.

***

Goose did his best to clear the jump, but the momentary lapse in concentration had cost the horse his momentum. He pushed himself into the air, stretching as much as he could in an attempt to gain the height.

Treize gave his horse all the help he could, moving forward in his saddle and taking as much weight off the horse's back as possible. His hands slid along Goose's neck allowing the reins to slip through his fingers and not interfere with the horse's mouth in any way. He felt the power of the hind quarters as the animal propelled himself up and forward, saw the red 'bricks' of the wall rear up in front and then scatter around as Goose's forelegs brushed through them.

Landing safely on the other side amid a shower of red and white, Goose felt his rider shift and then the leg came against his side, encouraging him to rebalance and canter away from the jump. The
finish flags passed by and Goose slowed his pace, his rider turning him towards the collecting ring and the now subdued commotion. As Treize exited the ring he could see Otto holding Short Duck, the pony appearing to be distressed but settling down.

The public address system blared out that Treize had accrued four faults and that the placings would be announced in just a moment. Heero appeared from the side as Duck let fly with a loud neigh, Goose answering and drowning out Heero's words. Heero opted to wait until the two horses were together before repeating his words.

Duck almost pulled Otto off his feet as he tried to get to his friend. As soon as Goose was close enough, the pony began a series of snorts and wuffles, stretching his nose out to sniff at Goose who returned the sentiment, blowing softly through his nostrils at his little companion.

"Are you all right?" Heero repeated now that Treize would be able to hear him.

"I'm okay," Treize replied as he slipped his feet from within the stirrups and dismounted. Blue eyes narrowed as he stared at the mini pony, his attention then switching to Otto. "What happened? How did he get loose?"

"I don't know," Otto replied truthfully.

"Is Goose okay?" Duo said as his eyes traversed the horse and finding no signs of any damage.

"Goose is fine," replied Treize. "I'd like to know just how this little bugger got free though."

"Announcing the placings for the Open Jumping Competition..."

Quiet descended over the collecting ring as the announcer spoke.

"In first place with no faults and a time of 43.27 seconds; Mr. Heero Yuy riding Zero. Second place, with no faults and a time of 48.34 seconds; Miss Janet Watkins riding Summer Edition. Third place with four faults and a time of 46.52 seconds; Mr. Treize Khushrenada riding Tall Geese. Would those three place getters please enter the ring to receive their rosettes."

Duo couldn't help the cheer that left his mouth with the announcement and he turned his grinning face to his lover. "Well done, Heero!"

"Thanks."

"Congratulations to you too, Treize," Duo added, switching his gaze to the tall man.

"Thank you, Duo."

"Yeah, well done the pair of you," Otto added.

Treize remounted and waited for Heero who quickly tightened Zero's girth and then mounted to lead the place getters back into the ring to collect their rosettes. They filed in and stood in line in front of the judge who smiled at them. Approaching Heero with the blue rosette and an envelope, the judge fixed the rosette to Zero's bridle then handed Heero the envelope, shaking hands at the same time.

"Congratulations. That was an excellent round."

"Thank you," replied Heero politely.

The judge continued to move down the line, placing the red rosette on the next horse before approaching Treize. Fixing the white rosette to Goose's bridle the judge turned to Treize. "That was
a good round and it was going to be a close finish. Shame about the horse losing concentration at the wall."

"Thank you. Yes, he was going well up until then, but these things happen," Treize replied with a smile.

"He's a good horse. Is he by any chance your prospective mount for the Nations Cup?"

"Yes, he is. I'm hoping he will do well enough this season to catch the selectors' eye and make it onto the short list."

"Good luck. I think you have an excellent chance of making the team, despite today's little mishap."
The judge turned then and stepped to the side, indicating for Heero to lead the place getters on a lap of honor.

Exiting the ring, Treize and Heero were met with congratulations from other competitors which were accepted with grace. Dismounting, they found their 'grooms' and began to walk back to the cars and trailers. Duo walked as close as he dared to Heero without raising suspicion. Once back at the horse float, Duo set about taking Zero's jumping boots off while Heero unsaddled the gray.

Once Zero was rugged, stuffed full of carrots and settled with a hay net, the pair went across to Treize's float to see if they could lend a hand with anything as well as find out if either man had figured out how Duck had escaped.

Otto had tied the pony up again and checked out the immediate area to see what he could discover in regards to the pony and how he had gotten free. He could see the empty hay nets and knew the pony was probably responsible for that. The ground didn't show any signs of a scuffle and the piece of binder twine they tied the horses to was still intact. [1] The only conclusion Otto could come to was that Duck had managed to untie himself.

"Any clue as to how he got loose?" Treize asked as he removed Goose's saddle.

"There's no sign of a scuffle and the twine isn't broken which would rule out a fright. I'm betting he managed to untie himself. The end of the lead rope is a little frayed and damp so I'm pretty sure that's how he got free." Otto took over settling Goose, removing the horse's bridle and jumping boots before starting to brush the horse to remove the dried sweat.

"In future I suggest we tie him up with two half hitches. At least that knot will be harder for him to undo. "You're a little swine, Duck, you know that?" Treize grasped the pony by the halter and looked into the liquid brown eyes of the animal. "I should damn well get rid of you, only if I did Goose would probably stand in the corner of his stable and cry." Treize gave the halter a shake.

Duck knew he was in trouble, the tone of the voice told him as much. He hung his head.

"Did you find out how he got loose?" asked Heero as he and Duo rounded the trailer and came across Treize reprimanding the pony.

"We think he managed to untie himself," Otto replied as he put Goose's rug on.


"You sure you didn't sneak back here and untie him, Heero?" Treize turned to face Heero, an amused smile on his face.

"Huh? Why would I want to do that?" Heero was clearly confused.
"Knowing what competition you were up against for first place." Treize gave Duo a wink, the vet immediately catching on.

"I would never do anything like that!" Heero looked suitably offended.

Treize laughed. "I'm only joking, Heero. You have to admit though, looks quite suspicious."

Heero snorted. "I don't need to resort to underhanded tactics to beat you, Treize. Why don't you admit it, you knew Zero would beat you so you needed an excuse to blame your loss on."

"Touché, Heero," Treize grinned.

Heero laughed and shook his head. "I'm going to go get a drink and then load up Zero. Anyone want anything from the canteen?"

Treize asked for a drink, Otto a sandwich. Duo offered to go with Heero and help carry the stuff back. On the way to the canteen they stopped off at the 'gents' for a quick couple of congratulatory kisses and friendly grope.

* * *

Arriving home at the surgery, Duo gave Heero a hand to unload Zero and unhitch the horse float. As it was still early afternoon, Heero put the stallion in the paddock and went to give Duo a hand with the gear.

"I swear this stuff breeds," Duo stated as he walked towards the stable block, his arms full of bandages, boots and grooming tools. "You sure we took all this?"

Heero chuckled. "It always seems that way." He placed the saddle on the saddle horse and helped Duo to put the boots, bandages and grooming tools away. They fetched the last load from the car, hanging up Zero's bridle, placing the empty hay nets in the feed room and returning the water bucket to its place.

"Thanks, Duo." Heero wrapped his arms around Duo from behind and nuzzled the vet's neck.

"Mmmm. You're welcome, Heero." Duo tilted his head to give Heero better access to his neck. Sighing softly in content, Duo turned around in his lover's arms and partook of a deep kiss. "I think we need a shower," he said as he pulled away from the kiss.

"Now that sounds like a good idea. Want to save water and shower together?"

"Only if you promise to wash my back," Duo replied with a sultry smile.

"I'll do more than wash your back." Heero ran his hand down Duo's side and around to the vet's groin where he squeezed the half hard cock.

Duo's hips began to move, pushing lightly into the touch and craving more. "What are you waiting for?" he panted. "Let's get going. I need to check on Hilde and Catherine, make sure that everything is okay with the practice."

Chuckling softly, Heero released the swelling organ and pulled back. His own groin bulged and the tight jodhpurs he wore didn't hide much. Taking Duo's hand in his own he headed towards the house. "I'll go get the shower ready while you check in with Hilde."

"I won't be long," Duo replied and headed for the intercom system while Heero disappeared in the
direction of the bedroom.

Moments later the bathroom door opened and Duo stepped inside. Heero was in the shower stall adjusting the water temperature. Quickly stripping himself of his clothes, Duo joined his boyfriend in the shower where Heero proceeded to thoroughly clean the vet; with his tongue as well as his hands.

* * *

Treize drove the goose neck float home, Otto sitting quietly beside him and watching the scenery pass by. As he drove so Treize reflected on the day’s events and the horse's performances. Despite the hiccup with Short Duck and Tall Geese, the day hadn't gone too badly. Treize was pleased with Goose's performance, the bay had gone really well and Treize knew in his mind that if Duck hadn’t gotten loose it would have been mere hundredths of a second between himself and Heero for first place. In future the mini pony would be double tethered at shows and with the alternative two half hitch knot. Treize was determined not to have the same thing happen again. Besides being a distraction to Goose, it was also dangerous for Duck to be running around loose.

"Sandrock went well," commented Otto as they neared the stables.

"Yes, he did. For his first show he did extremely well."

"That Heero is a pretty good rider."

"He's very talented, but he still has more to learn."

"Any ideas on what you plan to do with the other horse?"

Treize frowned. "I haven't decided yet. I'll be honest, I don't trust Taurus, but Heero seems equally as determined to train the animal. I just hope the horse doesn't do anything stupid and hurt Heero in the process."

"Shame he's so hot headed," Otto muttered.

"I agree with you there. That horse does have a lot of potential and a good jump on him. He also has a good turn of speed which would make him a force to be reckoned with in speed events. His only problem is he doesn't want to listen to his rider."

"I would have thought he'd have calmed down a bit once he'd been gelded."

"So did I."

Otto scratched his neck. "I've tried changing his feed a little as you suggested, cutting back on his grain, but it doesn't seem to have made any difference. I really don't know what else you could try."

"I don't either," Treize replied as he turned the truck into the drive that would lead them to the stable block.

"It would be a shame to see him go."

"Nothing has been decided on his fate yet. I'm going to have a talk with Heero on Wednesday and see what he thinks. Who knows, maybe he can offer some suggestion as to how to calm the animal down." Seeing Otto about to open his mouth, and having a pretty good idea of what he was going to say, Treize got in first. "I won't use drugs on him and I won't sell him as he is, it would ruin my reputation."
It was a sad but true fact that drugs had made their way into the showjumping world. Treize wasn't adverse to the use of drugs on horses, but only for a medical requirement. He knew of people that regularly used drugs to calm an excitable horse, making it easier to handle. Being fully aware of the fact that drugs could and were in use, the E.F.A had taken a firm stance and released its policy on drugs and their use in the equine world. Random swabbing took place at shows and if a horse was found to have a banned substance in its system the penalties were extremely high.

No, that was one area that Treize avoided like the plague. His horses only received drugs the vet prescribed for them when injured and Treize had the animal swabbed at his own expense before taking it out to compete again to ensure all traces were out of the animal's system. Treize may have been a lot of things, but he was no cheat.

Bringing the goose neck to a halt out the front of the stable block, Treize cut the engine and began to climb out. Otto got out from the other side and went to the float doors, dropping them down and fetching Sandrock out first. Two stable boys appeared, one took Sandrock while the other waited for Goose. Treize unloaded Goose, handed the lead rope over and then went back in for Short Duck. Otto unloaded Taurus and led the chestnut to his stable where he proceeded to remove the floating boots and change the horse's rug.

Treize left Duck in the large stable with Goose and went to begin unloading the gear from the float. A lot of the items would remain in the 'tack' compartment, only the saddle and bridles were brought in to the main tack room. One of the stable boys came out and took the water buckets to be washed out and then replaced in the float for the next show. Hay nets were also removed but placed in the feed shed ready to be filled again.

Having seen to Taurus, Otto checked on Sandrock and Goose before sending the stable boys to clean out the float while he fed the horses.

Treize did a quick check over the horses, making sure they were comfortable and settled before he sought out Otto and told him he was retiring to the house and would return later that evening for a final check before going to bed. Picking up Goose's white rosette, Treize walked past the float and headed for the house.

The Khushrenada estate sat on twenty five acres of rich, green land. The large house stood at the base of the driveway that led from the road. The driveway forked, the left leading to the house while the right went further down to where the stables stood. The stables were built in a square shape with a main entry leading to a grassed courtyard. As you passed underneath the arch into the stables themselves so the lay out became apparent. Loose boxes ran down both left and right sides of the courtyard. To the immediate left of the arch lay the tack room, to the right the feed shed. Directly opposite were the wash bays, tie up areas and small sand yard. There was also the way out to the back paddocks and schooling areas. It was a neat and tidy set up, making optimum use of the space with excellent facilities. Over head of the arch, Treize had had built a loft of sorts which served as grooms quarters for the stable boys. Otto was the head groom and lived with his wife in a small cottage to the side of the stables on the estate's grounds. The stable boys were fed and looked after by Otto's wife.

The gray stone of the house was tinged with orange from the setting sun as Treize approached. He hesitated to call it a mansion, even though it was big enough. He lived alone, having inherited the estate when his father passed on several years ago. His father had been a keen horseman, preferring to race animals though, but hadn't objected when Treize had shown his interest in showjumping. Most of Treize's earlier showjumpers had come from his father's racing stable, the thoroughbreds being too slow on the track and so passed over to Treize to see what he could do with them.
Now with his father dead and buried, Treize shared the house with his housekeeper, memories and a lot of photographs; not to mention an impressive display of ribbons, rosettes and cups he'd won over the years. Stepping into the kitchen, Treize removed his boots and stood them by the back door to be cleaned. In sock clad feet he padded across the kitchen, smelling the delightful aroma of whatever it was Jenny was cooking for his dinner. He couldn't see the housekeeper anywhere though which was a little strange, but he didn't dwell on it. He passed through the door and along the hall way, intending to go upstairs to his rooms and take a long, hot bath when he heard the sounds of voices in the drawing room. Frowning, he made his way forward and stepped into the drawing room. The voices stopped as he entered, the two women turning in his direction.

"Ah, here is Master Treize now. I'll just go get the tea." Jenny smiled and gave Treize a nod in greeting before leaving.

Treize tossed the white rosette to the sideboard and eyed the decanter of whiskey before turning his attention back to the woman who sat on the leather couch.

"To what do I owe this visit, Relena?"

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[1] Binder twine: This is the strong twine used to bind up bales of hay. Horsemen use it for many things, one of which is to tie a piece of it in a loop to the rings on a horse float. You then pass the lead rope through the loop of twine and tie it in a quick release knot. This way should the horse panic for any reason and pull back, the twine will snap before the halter or lead rope which can be expensive to replace.
Chapter 11

Relena looked up and smiled. "It's nice to see you again too, Treize."

Jenny returned carrying a silver tray with cups, saucers, tea pot, sugar and milk. She set the tray down on the small coffee table. "Would you like me to pour?"

"No, thank you. That won't be necessary, Jenny," Treize said as he stepped over and sat down opposite Relena.

"Very well. Dinner will be ready in an hour. Will Miss Relena be staying for dinner?"

Treize raised an eyebrow at Relena. "Care to join me for dinner?"

"Thank you, that would be lovely."

Jenny smiled. "I'll set another place." With that the housekeeper left, closing the door behind her.

Treize began to pour the tea, handing Relena her cup before taking his own and sitting back in the chair. "I thought you were in Europe."

"I was, but I came back early. There isn't a great deal on the market over there at the moment."

"Did you find anything at all?"

"One stallion and a couple of mares. They will be arriving in two months time, then they have to go into quarantine for six weeks before I can have them taken to the stud."

"What's the stallion like?"

"Nice. He's sixteen three, dapple gray, nine years old."

"Breeding?"

"Pure Holstien. He's done the European circuit with quite a bit of success. He's stood at stud in Germany for the last two seasons and his progeny look promising. Head's a little plain but his shoulders are flat and sloping. The hind quarters on him though - absolutely magnificent."

"And the mares?"

"One Hanoverian, the other Holstien. Both sixteen two, one bay, one brown. The Hanoverian is a five year old, broken but not competed. The Holstien is eight, unbroken broodmare with two foals already produced."

"What's the breeding?" Treize leaned forwards and topped up his tea.

"The mares are by Talisman and Wildfleur, while the stallion is by Millionaire out of a mare called Peacetime."

Treize had heard of the stallion, Millionaire, he'd sired some of Europe's top show jumpers. "It sounds like you might have something good with the stallion. Have you decided which mares you're going to put him to?"
Relena shook her head. "Not yet. I'm going to have a look back over the bloodlines and see which of the current broodmares would be the most suitable."

"I'll be interested to come and have a look at him once he's out of quarantine."

"And no doubt you'll want to throw a saddle on him and see what he's like," Relena laughed.

"But of course."

"First I have to get them over here. Don't worry, Treize. Once they have cleared quarantine and are settled at the stud you can take Peacemillion out and put him through his paces."

"Peacemillion?" Treize questioned.

"That's the stallion's name."

"Ah."

The door to the drawing room opened and conversation ceased for the moment as Jenny announced that dinner was ready whenever they were. Treize left the housekeeper to show Relena through to the dining room while he quickly went and freshened up.

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Standing on the stone steps at the front of the mansion, Treize watched the disappearing tail lights of Relena's car as she left. He turned and went back into the house, heading for the drawing room and decanter of whiskey that had been calling all night. He poured himself a generous measure and took a sip. The alcohol burned a fiery trail down his gullet and into his stomach. Moments later the warmth began to seep through his blood stream.

"Will there be anything else this evening, sir?"

"No, thank you, Jenny."

"Then I will retire for the night. Will you be requiring breakfast at the usual time?"

"Yes, please."

"Good night then, sir."

"Good night, Jenny."

The housekeeper left and Treize sat down to enjoy the rest of his whiskey before making his final check on the horses. His eyes slipped half shut as his mind went over Relena's visit. Relena owned the Peacecraft stud. One hundred acres of rolling hills and rich pastures; she was also Treize's closest neighbor. Relena's father had been a breeder of racehorses, running a large and profitable stud that had produced some top thoroughbreds over the years. Relena, like himself had been brought up around the equines and had developed a love for them. Treize's father had often purchased yearlings from the stud and raced them, some successfully, some not. Whereas Treize had gone in for the competitive sport of showjumping, Relena had studied bloodlines and breeding.

The woman had assisted in the stud's breeding program until her father's abrupt passing when she was only fourteen. Once she'd inherited the stud, her mother having died when Relena was only ten, she shocked everyone by disposing of all the thoroughbred stock except for one stallion and a few broodmares. Then she continued to shock by buying two warmblood stallions and a select group of
mares and proceeding to breed with them, infusing some of the thoroughbred blood along the way to add refinement and speed. When the first crop of foals hit the ground people began to speculate about Relena's ability to run such a large operation at a young age, but Treize hadn't. He had a pretty good idea what Relena was up to and so it came as no surprise when the woman approached him with her plans.

He'd sat quietly while Relena had explained her reasons and long term goals, and had admitted she'd had an excellent foresight. It was very simple. Everyone was breeding thoroughbreds and while there was still good money to be made in the racing game, there was a market out there that was even more lucrative, one that hadn't been fully tapped yet. Showjumping and dressage were two major equine sports that were on the rise and the demand for quality stock was high. With the country beginning to send teams to compete at International level it was becoming apparent that the current type and quality of stock wasn't up to International standards.

Relena had seen the opportunity to make some very good money and aid the sports at the same time. She took a gamble by selling the thoroughbreds and using the money to purchase top stock from Europe. The resulting foals she hoped would excel in their respective discipline and that's why she'd sought out Treize.

Knowing the man's drive and ambition as well as his skills she'd offered him a proposition to suit them both. Relena would breed the horses, raise them at the stud and once they were two year olds, Treize would go over them. Those he deemed good enough to make the top grade in showjumping he would take back to his own stables. Those he didn't think would amount to anything were broken in and given basic education before being sold. Relena paid Treize for his time in breaking the youngsters, a fixed price.

Those that Treize took on for his own stable he had the option of either keeping for himself, in which case he would pay Relena an agreed sum, or selling at a handsome profit which they split on a 60 - 40 ratio, once the horse had competed successfully and attained A grade level of competition. Relena taking the larger share of the profit didn't bother Treize as he got to keep all the winnings from the horses.

It was a good arrangement, one that suited them both. Relena was fast making a name for herself as a breeder of top stock while Treize was fulfilling his ambitions of competing at International level.

The new horses that Relena had told him about had sparked his interest. The stallion especially. He was keen to see the animal first hand as well as put him through his paces. If he was half as good as his sire he would prove to be invaluable to the Peacecraft bloodlines. Finishing off his whiskey, Treize got up and wandered to the back door, slipping his feet into an old pair of sneakers and walking down to the stables to make his rounds for the evening.

* * *

Catherine had Mondays and Tuesdays off from the practice, Heero taking over on the Mondays as his days free from the Khushrenada stable were Sundays and Mondays. Tuesdays were the only days now that Hilde and Duo had to cope on their own and they weren't too bad as the practice was usually quiet during the first couple of weekdays. With them having attended the show on the Sunday, Treize had given Heero the Tuesday off in lieu of the Sunday and Heero took advantage of the extra day to do a little more work with Shini.

Duo had done the morning consults and Hilde was rostered for the evening ones. There wasn't anything booked for surgery and Duo had been contemplating mowing the lawn and planting some vegetables in the vegetable patch that Heero had spent the morning digging over. When Heero mentioned he was going to teach Shini to lunge that afternoon, all thoughts of mowing the lawn went
directly out of Duo's head.

With lunch finished, Duo accompanied his boyfriend to the paddock and the colt who greeted them, immediately looking for carrots. Heero caught the youngster and brought him up to the stable block where Shini was given a quick brush over. Duo stood patting the steel gray neck while Heero fetched the gear he would need from the tack room. With the gear all assembled, Heero began to place it on the young colt. First went the roller [1], fitting snugly around Shini's girth area, Heero checking that it wasn't pinching in any way. Next was the lunging cavesson, followed by the lunging rein. Heero deemed the horse to be ready and slipped the halter off. Leading Shini out to the 'work' paddock, Duo followed behind with the lunging whip.

"Do you mind helping me to get him started, Duo?"

"Love to. Just tell me what you want me to do."

"Stand with him there while I feed the lunge rein out. I'll stand in the middle then I'll ask him to walk on, when I do, you start to walk, leading him in a circle with you. I want him to learn the voice commands for walk and halt and to stay out there on the circle."

"Sounds simple enough," Duo replied.

"Right. Let's see how we get on. Walk on."

Duo began to walk, leading Shini beside him. The colt followed easily enough.

"Halt."

Duo immediately stopped walking and Shini stopped beside him.

"Good," Heero said. "Walk on."

The process was repeated several times, Duo leading the colt while Heero gave the commands. After a short while, Duo let go of the cavesson and simply walked beside the colt, still stopping and starting as Heero gave the word. Slowly, Duo began to move away from Shini, letting the colt stop and start to Heero's voice until eventually, Duo stepped away completely and watched from a short distance. Shini was smart and caught on pretty quick. He did try to turn around and come in towards Heero at one point, but Heero had the lunge whip correctly positioned and gave the colt a gentle poke in the ribs to push him back out. The poke was enough to send the colt skittering back out and he didn't try it again. Heero spent another ten minutes just getting Shini to walk and halt before calling an end to the lesson. Coiling the lunge rope up, Heero walked out to where Shini stood and patted the colt. Duo came over and produced a welcome carrot.

"How come you went out to him and not bring Shini in to you?" Duo asked.

"It's a case of discipline. If I let him come into me then whenever he thinks he's had enough he will just turn and try to come in, and that can be dangerous."

"I see. So how exactly do you keep him out there on his own circle and why lunge anyway?" Duo's curiosity had gotten the better of him.

"Lunging is a good way to tone up muscles. It's also an invaluable teaching aid in preparation for when I finally break him in. If he learns the voice commands for walk, trot, canter and halt on the lunge, when I first get on him and start to teach him the leg aids it will be much easier. I'll apply a light pressure with my leg and at the same time tell him to walk on. Gradually he will associate the leg pressure with the word and action and then I can begin to stop using the voice and just use the
leg, reins and seat. As for how I keep him out there - it's quite simple. I make a triangle out of the horse, lunge rein and whip with me being the apex. I walk the smaller inner circle and he walks the outside, larger circle. By keeping the whip positioned at his flank area, should he try to cut his circle I can easily push him back out by poking him gently. Having the whip in that position also allows me to use it to drive him forwards." Heero patted the gray neck.

"Well, that makes sense. Good boy, Shini. He seems to be picking it up quite well."

"He's not the only one who was very obedient," Heero said with a sly grin.

"Hey!"

"You seemed to be doing quite well at taking orders. I wonder just how willing you are to completely follow orders." Heero gave his boyfriend a sultry look.

Duo felt the flush of heat as it spread over his body. "That would depend on who is giving the orders and what those orders were," he replied in a husky tone.

"Maybe we should find out."

"Ahhh..." Duo moaned. His mind began to conjure up all sorts of scenes that could result from Heero's words.

"I'm going to take Shini in now and untack him. Feel like a little ride once I'm done?"

"Now that depends on what sort of riding you have in mind," Duo said with a smirk.

"Maybe I should bring my whip and spurs."

Duo was now rock hard and aching. "Why are we still standing here for then? Come on, the sooner we get Shini sorted out, the sooner we can go riding."

With a chuckle, Heero gave the vet a quick kiss and took the colt back to the stables.

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Entering the house fifteen minutes later, Duo made sure to lock the door. They kissed in the kitchen, holding each other close and grinding their hips together. Somehow they made it through the kitchen and along the hall, still kissing and nipping, hands wandering and trying to find buttons and zippers. They stumbled through the bedroom door, Duo's pants around his knees, Heero's clinging precariously to his hips. They pulled apart long enough to remove the last of their garments and then tumbled to the bed, Duo tossing the stuffed animals to the floor to make way for their heated bodies.

Kissing resumed, Duo pushing Heero to his back and laving his lover's skin with licks and nips. Finding a nipple, Duo flicked his tongue across and then nibbled lightly, enjoying Heero's moans of appreciation.

Heero wanted in on the action too and reached around Duo to tug at his hips. Realizing what Heero wanted, Duo scooted across the mattress and straddled Heero's head, bringing his cock in line with Heero's mouth which immediately sucked lightly on the head. Duo groaned before bending his own head to lick at Heero's impressive length.

They sucked, nibbled and licked at each other, driving themselves ever higher with pleasure and enjoying each moment. Heero sucked on Duo's balls, rolling them gently in his mouth and savoring the silky feel of the scrotum against his tongue. In return, Duo nipped lightly at the sensitive patch of
skin just behind Heero's balls and then kissed it better. Heero's tongue licked over Duo's perineum and then moved further up to trace along the cleft.

"Ahhh..." Duo all but screamed and sat up slightly.

Heero took advantage, placing his hands on Duo's hips to steady the vet and hold him still as his tongue traversed the cleft again, this time pausing to tease at the tight pucker of flesh.

"Oh, fuck. That feels incredible, Heero."

Heero was enjoying himself too much to remove his mouth and reply. He ran his tongue around in small circles, torturing the sensitive nerves and coaxing more moans from the vet. Spreading Duo's cheeks wider apart, He brought his lips into play, kissing along the crevice and then stabbing at the hole with his tongue.

Duo squirmed and rocked under the assault, pleasure sang along his nerves, desire pulsed through his veins and his cock twitched with need.

Heero reached across and slipped a hand underneath the pillow to find the tube of lubrication. His heart was beating fast, tongue still distracting Duo as he wiggled the tube out and managed to uncap it. He coated his fingers thoroughly and then paused, hesitating, unsure of what Duo's reaction would be.

Over the past couple of years they had explored each other's bodies, discovering their likes and dislikes, pleasured each other with hands and mouths. They made love regularly but Heero had always been the bottom. Since the first time they had become intimate and Duo had voiced his concerns about being bottom, Heero had relented and never pushed the issue. He figured Duo would let him know when he wanted to try the reverse role. So far though, Duo had seemed content to continue to top.

Heero didn't mind, he enjoyed being on the receiving end of Duo's love, but he couldn't help the curiosity he felt and the need to experience love making from a top point of view. He knew that most of Duo's fears of bottoming stemmed from his insecurity about their relationship, but they had been a couple now for over two years and Heero had decided it was time to stop waiting, time to push things a little and see if he could get Duo to try being the uke.

Pulling his mouth away, Heero quickly brought his fingers to Duo's anus and began to circle, pushing just the tip of one finger inside while the other traced back and forth over the exposed cleft. Duo had allowed Heero to finger him before and seemed to enjoy it a lot, Heero was hoping to have his lover writhing in pleasure before he asked permission to take him.

Duo lowered his head again and resumed his feeding at Heero's groin. The tongue had nearly driven him to distraction, his balls ached fiercely and his cock throbbed. He was aware of Heero's fingers sliding inside and he enjoyed the sensations of those strong digits as they caressed his inner walls.

Gently and carefully, Heero began to work his fingers in and out, stretching the tight, virginal muscle. Duo's body felt hot and tight around his fingers and he longed to feel that warmth and tightness around his cock. A third finger was added, moving with the other two and stretching Duo's passage further. Pushing in deeper, Heero found the spongy bump of Duo's prostate and began to stroke over it, causing the vet to moan and pant with need. Knowing he had to stop now and find out Duo's reaction, Heero reluctantly removed his fingers.

"Why did you stop?" Duo asked as he looked over his shoulder.
"Duo..."

The tone of Heero's voice, the hesitancy in it sent a chill down Duo's spine and he lifted his legs to move his body and lie down next to his lover. "Heero?"

"Duo..." Heero pulled his lover into his arms, running a hand back along the vet's spine to his ass and then dipping a finger into the cleft. "Duo... I want, will you let me?"

"What, Heero?" Duo had a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Duo, you always make love to me and don't get me wrong, I love it, I love you, but..." Heero gave a sigh of frustration at his lack of words. "Can I? I'd like to make love to you. Will you let me take you? Please?"

Duo froze, all his past fears coming back to him. He struggled with his mind, telling himself that those fears were unfounded now. Heero had proven his love for Duo on more than one occasion. He wasn't about to take off once he'd gotten to screw his ass. He loved making love to Heero and had to admit he'd been a little curious as to how it would feel to have Heero make love to him, but as always the fears had overridden and Duo had again hidden behind his insecurities.

"I'll still be here in the morning, I'll still be here next week, next year. Duo, I'm not going to leave you just because I made love to you, nor will it mean I don't want you making love to me. I love it when you make love to me, you're gentle, kind and affectionate. I want you to experience how good it feels to be taken. If you really don't want to then that's okay too. I'll understand."

The sincerity in Heero's voice tugged at Duo's heart strings and he knew in his mind it was time to put those fears to rest. Heero loved him, Heero wasn't about to leave him.

"Okay," Duo replied, his voice a little unsteady.

At first, Heero wasn't sure he'd heard right and then when he looked into Duo's eyes he knew he had. He could see fear, uncertainty in those amethyst pools; but he could also see love and trust. He leaned close and placed a tender kiss to Duo's lips. "Thank you. I promise to be very gentle, I won't hurt you. If you feel uncomfortable or anything hurts, you tell me and I'll stop straight away.

Duo gave him a rueful smile. "I already know it's probably gonna hurt, or at least be uncomfortable - but I trust you, Heero."

Heero's heart cracked and he kissed his lover long and deep, telling him with his kiss just how much this gift meant to him. "Lie on your back and spread your legs for me, I want to make sure you're fully prepared.

Duo did as Heero asked, lying on his back and opening his thighs. A ripple of apprehension ran through him as he watched Heero applying lube to his fingers. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to relax, feeling Heero's fingers at his entrance again and then gently sliding in. All he could do was trust that Heero would look after him.

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[1] To see what a roller, lunging cavesson and lunging rein look like they have some pretty good pics here: http://www.kingstons.net.au/category114_1.htm

For information on the Holstiener breed of horse: http://www.imh.org/imh/bw/holstein.html
For information on the Hanoverian breed of horse: http://www.imh.org/imh/bw/hanov.html
Chapter 12

Heero knew he had to thoroughly prepare Duo. With the vet still being a virgin, at least in this respect, Heero wanted to be absolutely certain that Duo wouldn't experience any pain at all. He slipped a finger back inside and began to work it around. The passage was tight, despite his earlier attentions to it and Heero knew it was from Duo's nervousness. Gently working the finger in and out, Heero reached for Duo's cock and began to feather the fingers of his other hand over the swollen length.

The touch was welcomed and it helped Duo to relax a little. He moaned softly as Heero's fingers stroked over his length, teasing lightly. He kept trying to tell himself that this was simply Heero fingering him as he'd done before, that the pleasure would be just as intense and tried keep his mind off the throbbing shaft Heero sported that was a hell of a lot bigger than those fingers! He knew deep inside that Heero wouldn't deliberately hurt him, all he had to say was stop and Heero would. It wasn't easy though and a part of Duo desperately wanted to feel Heero inside, to know what it was like to be on the receiving end instead of the giving for a change. Duo latched onto that thought and willed himself to accept whatever Heero wanted to do.

A second finger slipped inside and Heero began to scissor them, persuading the tense muscle to relax and enjoy his touch. Slowly but surely both the body and the anal ring softened, letting him work his fingers with a lot more ease. Heero shifted slightly and released Duo's cock, ghosting his fingers over the shivering abdomen muscles and up towards Duo's nipples where Heero began to play. He caressed, rubbed and tweaked the hardened nubs, Duo's body writhing against the bedclothes as it was stimulated. Heero slipped a third finger inside, pleased to note that Duo was becoming more comfortable as his ministrations progressed. That was good.


Smiling to himself, Heero continued his caresses and torment. This was exactly what he wanted, Duo to enjoy his touches, to be distracted enough so that when Heero finally penetrated the vet Duo would be as relaxed as possible. He moved his fingers in and out, side to side, endeavoring to have Duo's passage as soft and stretched as he could. Steadily the anal ring gave, bowing to the stretching and loosening as Heero continued to work at the muscles. Pushing his fingers in deeper, Heero aimed to find Duo's prostate and drive his lover wild. He found it and rubbed lightly over it.

The response was electric.

"Ahhh!" Duo all but shot off the bed.

Heero chuckled. So responsive.

Duo had experienced Heero's fingers caressing his prostate before, it was a sensation one wasn't likely to forget in a hurry. He loved the sparks of pleasure that jolted through him with that touch. "More, Heero."

Happy to oblige, Heero continued to massage Duo's sheath, pushing his fingers in and out, stroking over that spongy bump from time to time until Duo was a writhing mess of want and need beneath him. Duo's anus had relaxed, the muscles both inside and out soft and compliant to Heero's touches and pressure. With Duo reduced to a puddle of hormones, it was time to move on. Gently, Heero eased his fingers out and fished for the lube again.
Duo grunted as his passage was left bereft. He raised himself up a little, resting on his elbows and cracked open his lust filled violet eyes. He groaned as he watched Heero lubing his cock and reached down to stroke his own and relieve a little of the ache. There was still fear flowing through Duo's veins; fear of the unknown. He couldn't help it. He knew it mustn't hurt or be that painful, if it was, then Heero wouldn't have let him make love to him all the time - unless Heero was secretly into that pain stuff. Duo dismissed that thought. Heero wasn't into anything that involved pain on any level and neither was Duo. No, being penetrated must be pleasant and pleasurable, otherwise Heero would have refused to bottom ages ago.

Spreading the lube along his thick length, Heero could see the gears turning in Duo's head and had a pretty good idea of what Duo was thinking. He vowed to be even more gentle and not cause his love any pain at all if he could possibly help it. With his cock now as slick as he could get it, Heero dropped the lube and looked at the beauty before him. "Ready?"

Duo hesitated for a moment before nodding his head. "Yeah, I guess I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be."

"Duo, if you don't want me to, if you don't want this, all you have to do is say. I don't want to force or push you into something you're not ready for or comfortable with. I love you too much to do that."

It was all Duo could do to keep the tears from spilling at Heero's words. He reached a hand up and caressed Heero's cheek. "If I don't do this now, Heero, I'm afraid I won't ever do it. I trust you not to hurt me. Besides, there has to be something good about being bottom otherwise you wouldn't have let me take you all those times." The attempt at humor only strengthened Heero's resolve not to hurt the vet. "It may feel a little uncomfortable at first as your body stretches and adjusts to me being inside you, but I will take it very slowly and stop to give you time to get used to it and let your muscles relax further. If it gets too much at any stage all you have to do is say and I will stop."

"Thank you."

"Pull your legs up for me, Duo."

Duo raised his legs, Heero helping him to position them so as to leave him open and exposed for penetration in the best possible way. Thighs apart, knees bent and feet resting on the mattress, Duo presented a delectable sight to Heero and the accountant couldn't help but moan his appreciation.

"You're gorgeous," Heero breathed.

Duo suitably blushed. "Heero, make love to me."

With love shining in his eyes, Heero settled between his partner's spread legs and guided the head of his cock to Duo's entrance. The pink rosebud quivered a little as Heero placed the head of his penis against that ripe cherry and applied a little pressure.

The pressure wasn't painful, in fact, Duo couldn't quite describe exactly how it felt. Teasing but promising more. "Please," he said, his own cock throbbing.

Heero teased the hole for a few moments, rubbing his cock head against it and applying pressure before he settled down to concentrate on entering that hot sheath with minimal unpleasantness for the vet. Gently his hips pushed forth, pressing firmly against the hole and insisting on being allowed in. Duo's body seemed to have other ideas though and stubbornly refused to grant the entry. Heero pressed a little stronger and felt the muscles hesitate. Another push and the muscles began to relent. One more firm press and the head slid inside. Heero held still, his eyes traversing Duo's face and reading the emotions he found there.
Doing his best to relax his muscles, Duo couldn't help the tremble of limbs as Heero's cock pressed against his entrance. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the love between them. His body protested, telling him it couldn't possibly accept something incoming, it wasn't designed for that, only for outgoing, but Duo concentrated hard and willed his anal muscles to relax and enjoy what was being offered. Gradually he felt the muscles relent and grudgingly allow Heero's cock to penetrate. As the muscles stretched further than Heero's three fingers so the burn of entry made itself known and Duo bit his lip, closing his eyes and waiting for the slight pain to settle. Heero didn't move, didn't push in any further and Duo was grateful for that.

"Are you okay?"

The concern in Heero's voice penetrated Duo's ears and he opened his eyes again to find Heero gazing down at him, a worried look on his handsome features. "Burns a little," he replied honestly.

"I know it does, but it will soon pass. Try to remain relaxed, I won't push in any further until you're comfortable again."

Lying together on the bed, Duo thought how this must look. He'd only got the head of Heero's cock inside him and he was trying to fight the urge to tell Heero to stop, that this was a bad idea. He reminded himself of the number of times Heero had willingly given himself to Duo and that Heero must feel this same burning sensation every time Duo entered him. Yet Heero never complained. Duo was damned if he was going to! The burning had eased considerably Duo noticed, having been distracted by his thoughts the pain had slowly subsided as his body adjusted to the new intruder.

Noticing the slight relaxation of Duo's facial muscles, Heero knew the pain was subsiding a bit. "Feel a bit better?"

Duo nodded. "Yeah, it's easing off. You can push in a little more now."

"Only if you're sure."

"I'm sure."

Gently, Heero began to push again, the slickness of the lube aided his entry and now that the head was inside the rest of the shaft followed easily. "The worst part is over," Heero informed his lover. "The head is larger than the rest so it's always a little on the painful side until that manages to slip inside."

Duo couldn't help it; he laughed. "It all sounds so - clinical. The way you're explaining things."

Heero could see the humor in the statement and chuckled lightly. "I guess it does. How do you feel now?"

Duo had to think about that for a moment. Once the head was inside and his muscles had stretched to accommodate the extra girth, the rest of Heero's cock had followed easily and without pain. He could feel the throbbing of the length deep inside and while it was certainly different, it wasn't unpleasant. In fact, it turned Duo on to feel that heated flesh against the inner walls of his passage, caressing the sheath. The pain had gone and now Duo simply felt - full. "Doesn't hurt any more, feels different, but nice."

"Would you like me to move now?"

Move? Oh yeah. To make love one had to move. He'd forgotten about that bit. Duo thought to himself. "Ah, okay. Just take it slow," Duo replied with a tinge of fear in his voice.
"It shouldn't hurt, Duo. Your body has stretched to take me so it should start to feel good now."
Slowly, Heero eased his hips back, withdrawing a couple of inches and then pushing back in. He thought it would probably be best to only move a little to begin with, until Duo was comfortable with it and realized it wasn't going to hurt. He set a slow but steady rhythm, withdrawing two or three inches and then sliding back inside.

The feeling of that heat inside, sliding against his channel walls gave Duo sensations he'd never dreamt could happen. He didn't realize just how sensitive or rich with nerves his passage was. And it seemed that Heero was finding each and every one of them. There was no pain, just a completely foreign sensation of being full and unable to pass anything. The stroking of his nerve endings though soon had him writhing and demanding Heero move faster and deeper.

Relieved to see the discomfort on Duo's face replaced with pleasure and the demand that he move faster, Heero was only too happy to comply. His hips began to move at a slightly faster pace, still cautious but withdrawing further and plunging deeper with each stroke. Duo's sheath was tight and hot, the muscles smooth and tormenting in their own way. Now Heero knew just exactly why Duo enjoyed taking him so much. The sensations of his cock being stroked, caressed continuously from tip to base by that incredibly moist heat was intoxicating.

Steadily the pace built and as Duo became more comfortable with the act so he began to push his own hips up to meet Heero's downward thrust. The movement of the hard shaft against the tender walls was mind blowing, but when Heero shifted slightly and his cock head brushed over Duo's prostate the vet almost cried out. A gasp of pleasure left his lips instead as his entire nervous system went into sensation overdrive. His limbs trembled while liquid fire tore through his blood stream. Duo was no stranger when it came to his prostate, Heero had touched him there before and Duo had thoroughly enjoyed the sensations he got from it, but nothing could compare to having his sweet spot caressed by the head of Heero's penis.

Knowing that he'd obviously hit Duo's sweet spot, Heero angled again. If he could rub against Duo's prostate as much as possible then the pleasure his partner would feel would far out weigh any discomfort. Duo's body arched into his again, the inner walls closing slightly around his shaft and stimulating him further. Heero didn't know how long he would be able to keep this up, he was so close already. Shifting his body weight, Heero managed to bring a hand between them and locate Duo's cock. The flesh was thick and heavy in his hand, sticky with Duo's pre cum and Heero closed his fist. The strokes were slow but steady, moving in counter rhythm to his thrusts. While Duo was demanding he move faster, Heero refused. He wanted to take it slow, not only to enjoy it for as long as possible, but Heero knew from experience that Duo's ass would be sore tomorrow and he didn't think the vet would want people asking questions about his gait.

"Yes," hissed Duo as Heero's cock hit his prostate again. His body was fairly thrumming with pleasure, tingling from head to toe in bliss. Heero's hand stroking his length added to the enjoyment and Duo wondered if he would survive the experience. Why the hell he'd waited for so long to enjoy this he couldn't figure out. He gave up thinking though and relaxed into the sensations, opting to simply feel and go with his body's needs.

Heero's hand sped up. He needed to make his lover come, and soon. The pace and caressing of his cock by Duo's channel wasn't helping him in keeping his own orgasm at bay and Heero was becoming desperate. He knew Duo was also close, the tensing of his lover's body beneath him, the arching of Duo's hips as his sweet spot was brushed told Heero that. Leaning forwards, Heero pressed a kiss to Duo's throat and the let his words ghost over Duo's ear. "Come for me, Duo."

Unable to hold back any longer, Duo gave in to his body's desire. His spine bowed as hips thrust up, drawing Heero's shaft deeper inside and hitting his prostate again. The pleasure flooded his nervous system...
system and combined with Heero's stroking of his cock, Duo let go and flew. He tumbled over the edge into nirvana, seed pulsing from his slit and coating Heero's hand.

With Duo's climax running through his body so the heated passage began a series of rhythmical contractions, trapping and caressing Heero's cock. It was the last straw for the accountant and with a keening cry he found his own completion. The inner walls milked his cock, encouraging his fluid to spurt forth and be swallowed by Duo's bowels. Heero let himself be drawn into the pleasure, nerves singing, brain numb to anything other than the sensations coursing through him.

As the force of their climaxes began to recede, Heero slumped against his lover, breath panting, body coated in sweat. He shifted to the side, his softening cock sliding from inside the tight heat to lay spent against his thigh. Duo immediately turned and their arms wrapped around each other, the afterglow consuming them both and they were content to simply lie there and enjoy it.

After several minutes had passed, Duo felt enough in control of his body to move and speak. He raised his head and found Heero's lips, kissing his boyfriend deeply. "I really enjoyed that, Heero. Thanks for being gentle with me."

"It was my pleasure, Duo. It felt incredible for me too."

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to let you... Well, take me."

"Hush. You don't have to explain anything, Duo. I understand. It's not something to be given or taken lightly and I'm honored you would allow me the privilege of being the one to take your virginity."

Duo's heart felt as if it would burst from inside his chest with the love it held. He couldn't find the words to voice what he was feeling so he decided to simply snuggle close and kiss every exposed piece of Heero's flesh he could find to convey his feelings. He knew Heero would understand.

The two bodies remained on the bed for some time, just enjoying the intimacy of being together and bathing in the mutual love they shared. The drying fluids though made their presence felt soon enough and reluctantly the pair got up and took a shower before enjoying dinner and a movie, then heading to bed.

* * *

Treize watched carefully as Heero brought Taurus around towards the grid. There were five jumps in total, starting at two foot six and rising by two inches each jump to the fifth which stood at three foot two. Treize had set them two strides apart and now Heero was about to bring Taurus around to jump them for the first time.

It was Wednesday, Heero's first day back at the stables since Sunday's show. Taurus and Sandy had been rested for the past two days. Treize had kept a close eye on Taurus after his 'incident' with the jump, but the horse had not suffered any damage from the flying poles. His legs were fine and he was ready for some work. Heero had spent the last hour working the chestnut on the flat, practicing turning, stopping and transitions from gait to gait.

Heero could feel a subtle difference in the horse, Taurus appeared to be listening to his aids a little better than before. Heero didn't get his hopes up too much though. Taurus could be as good as gold on the flat but as soon as he saw the jumps he became a different animal, pulling and wanting nothing more than to jump. This would be the true test, once Taurus saw the line of jumps, Heero would know if his arms were going to be pulled out of their sockets or not.
Grids were a good way of schooling a horse. They made the animal use its hind quarters and take notice of its rider. With only two strides between fences it was imperative the horse listen, otherwise it would run out of steam by the end of the grid and possibly knock down or refuse the last couple of jumps. Grids were also useful to calm a hot headed horse which is why Heero tended to use them a lot with Taurus, although he was seriously beginning to wonder if he needed to find another method of schooling for the impatient gelding.

Steadying the canter, Heero maintained a light contact with Taurus' mouth whilst driving the horse together with his legs and seat. The amount of contained energy Heero held between his hand and leg felt like a stick of dynamite. Heero was just waiting, prepared for the inevitable explosion once Taurus saw the jumps.

Heero could see Treize standing to the side, ready with advice should he need it and was grateful. He'd learnt a lot from Treize, the skills and knowledge the older man shared had seen Heero's riding improve tremendously. Heero sat down in his saddle and turned Taurus for the grid. His legs came on, pushing the horse forwards as the first of the fences approached.

Taurus pricked his ears and eyed the jumps. His stride shortened as he approached and a ripple of apprehension went through his frame.

Heero sat down harder and pushed the slowing horse forwards. Treize watched, noting the gelding slowing down and Heero's attempts to keep the horse together. Four strides away from the first fence, Taurus slammed the brakes on and refused to go any closer. Heero ran a soothing hand down the sweating neck and turned Taurus away from the jump, pushing him back into canter and circling. With the rhythm established once again, Heero turned Taurus back to the grid and rode hard at it.

The driving legs and seat ensured that Taurus continued to go forward, approaching the first of the fences again. This time Heero thought that the horse was going to take the grid, the animal's body continuing to move forwards. Two strides away from the fence and Taurus propped, dropped his shoulder and ducked out the side. Heero almost came off.

"Enough!" Treize shouted and began to walk over from where he'd been standing by the gate.

Heero managed to get himself back in the saddle and bring Taurus to a halt, then walked the gelding over to his approaching boss. "Take him into the stables, Heero."

"But, if I stop now and let him get away with it, he'll be twice as difficult tomorrow," Heero protested.

"Heero. I know what you're saying and under normal circumstances I would agree. However, there is something not right here and I think I know what it is. Take the horse in and meet me in the tack room. We need to talk." Treize turned on his heel and walked away leaving Heero with no choice but to follow.

With Taurus unsaddled, Heero made his way into the tack room where Treize waited for him. The man looked up as Heero entered and motioned for him to sit at the small table in the corner. Treize made them both a coffee and handed Heero a mug. The tack room had its own kettle and a small 'fridge so if the employees wanted a drink they could easily get one and not have to go back to the cottage or sleeping quarters to get it, it also made a perfect lunch room and place to sit, relax and chat whilst cleaning the many pieces of tack the Khushrenada horses used.

Sitting opposite, Treize cut to the chase. "What do you think is Taurus' problem?"

"If I didn't know any better I'd say the horse is scared."
"I think you've hit the nail on the head. Not so much scared as he's lost confidence. Taurus has always jumped anything he's been put at, he's never refused, never hit anything or had an accident of any shape or form over a jump. The crashing of the jump at the show appears to have unnerved him and caused the horse to lose his confidence. That's my opinion."

"He's willing enough on the flat, but then he's always been fairly responsive there. It's when he's about to jump he's always been a handful."

"Yeah. He's never had reason to fear a jump but I'm afraid he does now and that's the root of the problem. He's thinking that every jump he tries is going to result in him being hurt by those poles."

"But he wasn't hurt at the show, Duo went over him completely and said there wasn't a mark on him and Duo would know, he's a vet," Heero stated.

"The scar isn't physical, Heero. It's mental. Taurus now thinks that every jump is going to bite him. I'd say the knock he took, while not damaging him in any visible way like cutting him or such, hurt enough through bruising or jarring that he now sees every jump as pain."

"Sounds feasible." Heero chewed on Treize's words for a moment. "Think we can cure him?"

"I'd say this is actually a blessing in disguise."

"How?"

"If Taurus is now wary of the jumps he should start to listen to his rider and behave himself."

"Not much good if I can't get him to even approach a fence," muttered Heero.

"I think we need to take him back to basics; complete basics. If we start again and go slowly he should come good, be more manageable and have a healthy respect for show jumps."

"You want me to go back to pole and cavalletti work with him?"

"I think that will be the only way we'll get him jumping again."

Heero cocked his head. "Could work."

"Time will tell."

The pair sat for a few minutes in silence, Heero contemplating what Treize had said about Taurus and taking the horse completely back to the beginning of his education and Treize musing over how best to broach the other subject he wanted to talk to Heero about. Treize decided it would be better to come right out and simply ask, as long as he made it perfectly clear to Heero that he wasn't about to judge him in any way or change their employment arrangement then Heero would hopefully talk to him.

"Heero?"

"Yes?"

"I hope you don't mind me asking this and I want to reassure you that your answer will not change anything at all regarding the relationship we share or your employment here."

Heero looked up sharply.

"Just what exactly is your relationship with Doctor Maxwell? I know you share a residence and do
the bookwork for his practice, but you seem a lot closer than just friends. Are you gay?"

Heero felt the color drain from his face. How the fuck did Treize find out? And more to the point, what was his answer going to be?

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 13

The question that came from his boss' mouth was something Heero would never have expected. His mind was in turmoil and he felt sick to the stomach. Several thoughts raced through his brain as he scrambled to find the best way to react to the question. Treize had said his answer wouldn't affect his employment or the relationship he currently shared with the other rider and so far Treize had been nothing but open and honest with him; why would he lie now?

The sudden paleness of Heero's skin was enough to confirm the answer to the question for Treize, but he wanted to hear what Heero had to say.

"It's probably very inappropriate for me to be asking such a personal question of you and in reality, it's really none of my business. However, I can see you both share a unique bond and the only time I've ever seen that sort of bond before is between two people that care deeply about each other."

Treize gave a soft smile and kept his body language non-threatening in an attempt to aid the other rider to relax a little.

Heero had always been raised to be honest. You told a lie you had to tell another to cover that one, and then another and another until eventually you were caught in your own web of deceit. Heero took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair.

"Yes. I am gay, Treize. Duo Maxwell is my partner and my lover and I would die to keep him safe and protect him from ridicule." Heero added the last bit, not only because it was true, but he wanted Treize to know that Duo meant the world to Heero and he wouldn't see his partner hurt because Treize didn't like homosexuals.

It wasn't hard to pick up on the underlying threat, but Treize wasn't worried. He'd detected more than that in the way Heero had answered him.

"Thank you for answering my question honestly. Heero, I don't care if you're gay, it makes no difference to me. You've never given me anything other than one hundred percent in your work here with the horses and the staff. I can't see that confirming your orientation is going to affect that in any way, is it?"

"No. I enjoy my work here, I love riding and gaining experience and I hope to continue."

"Good. I have no intentions of letting you go. You're one of the better riders I've had through this stable and I hope to see you achieve your dream. If it's any consolation to you, I'm bisexual."

Heero's head jerked up at that bit of information and Treize laughed.

"Yes, Heero. I like both sexes and believe me when I say I know exactly what sort of prejudice you suffer at the hands of society. Your secret is safe with me. I will not breathe a word regarding you or Doctor Maxwell and the relationship you share."

"Thank you, Treize."

"No problem. You two just make sure to keep your lines of communication open. A love that is obviously so right should be nurtured and encouraged to grow, not shot down and cursed by narrow minded bigots."
"Just when did you go from 'riding instructor' to 'relationship councilor'?’" Heero asked, the amusement evident in his voice. He was deeply grateful that Treize understood and warmed that the older man thought the love he and Duo shared was special. Heero already knew it was, but it was nice to have someone else think so too.

"I'm a man of many talents," Treize replied with a smirk. "Although what some of those talents are you're not going to find out. The last thing I need is for a jealous lover, and vet at that, to be hunting me down with a scalpel."

Heero couldn't help but laugh. "Now that would be a sight to see."

Treize shook his head. "Will not happen, no way." They sat in silence for a few minutes, Treize pleased that his employee trusted him enough to have answered his question and Heero thinking about the turn of events in his life.

"Come on, work waits for no man. I've got Goose to ride and Sandrock needs some exercise."

Heero got up and rinsed out his mug before following Treize back out to the stable block to get the horses ready.

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Hilde arrived at the practice just as Catherine was settling up the last account with a client. She waited until the client had left and closed the door behind her for Catherine. "How was the morning?" Hilde asked as she turned the sign around to 'closed'.

"Steady," replied the receptionist.

"We still only have the two surgeries booked for this afternoon?"

"Yes. Both arrived this morning and they're in the kennels. Hilde?"

The female vet paused on her way to the kennels and back tracked to the reception area. "Yes?"

"Has something happened to Doctor Maxwell?"

Hilde stopped dead in her tracks. "Pardon?" Immediately all sorts of things began to run through Hilde's mind; none of them good. "What do you mean? Is he hurt or something?"

"No. No, not hurt. It's kind of hard to explain."

"Try starting at the beginning." Hilde moved into the small reception area and leaned against the desk.

"I can't exactly put my finger on it." Catherine frowned as she tried to find the words she wanted to explain Doctor Maxwell's behavior. "He seems, sort of dreamy. Like he's not really all there. Oh, I know that sounds stupid. He's still the same vet, chatting with the clients and treating the patients, but when there's no one around he seems to float off into his own world. I guess that doesn't make sense."

Hilde laughed. "Sounds like the Duo I know every day."

Turning to smile at the female vet, Catherine spoke again. "No, something's different. Go take a look for yourself, he's cleaning the consulting room."

Hilde turned and went down the hall to the consulting room where she stopped and peeked inside,
keeping herself out of Duo's range of vision. After observing her boss for a minute or two, Hilde went back to the reception area.

"Well?" Catherine said as she leaned back in her chair.

Rubbing the side of her nose, Hilde thought about the sight she'd just witnessed. "Yeah, he does seem a little more 'off the planet' than usual. If I didn't know him any better I'd swear he'd been in the drugs cabinet."

Catherine snorted. "I thought the same thing at first. You know, he reminds me of Trowa."

"Huh? What has your brother got to do with Duo? They're both complete opposites."

"I know that! No, what I meant was," Catherine motioned for Hilde to come a little closer and lowered her voice to a whisper. "He reminds me of Trowa when he's been out with Quatre. All dreamy and in love type stuff."

"Well, he is in love with Heero."

Catherine rolled her eyes in frustration, deciding she obviously needed to spell it out for the other woman. "He looks like he just got laid."

"Ewww! That is so an image I didn't need," retorted Hilde. "Look, I know they are together and lovers and I'm quite okay with that. I just don't need the mental pictures to go with it."

"Oh, I don't know. Two people so much in love, sharing that love. I think it's romantic." Catherine's face took on a dreamy look of its own.

"What's romantic?" Both women jumped as Duo stepped into the reception area.

"Ahh," stammered Hilde.

"Errr. I was just saying to Hilde that Trowa gets this really dreamy look on his face when he's been out with Quatre and how romantic it is." Catherine had to think fast, she didn't want her boss to think she had been spying on him.

Duo chuckled. "Women. All they ever see is the romance, never the quarrels, the blanket hogs, leaving the lid off the toothpaste or forgetting to replace the toilet roll."

"Are you the one that leaves the lid off the toothpaste?"

Duo began to turn a little red.

"Or are you a blanket hog, Duo?" Hilde teased. "I didn't think you would need a blanket with Heero to snuggle up to."

With the mention of Heero's name, Duo turned an even darker shade of red and his eyes took on a dreamy look, his mind supplying details of the previous evening.

"It looks to me like someone got laid last night," Catherine said slyly.

Duo froze, his heart almost stopping.

"You did, didn't you?" Hilde stated, an evil grin on her face.

"Ah." Duo fidgeted for a moment. "Don't you two have work to do?" he said, changing the subject.
"I've only got to put the last of the client files onto the computer," said Catherine with a grin.

"Don't you think you should be getting the patients prepped and ready for surgery?" Duo asked Hilde when the other woman didn't respond.

"Yup, I suppose I should," she replied with a cheeky smile. "Heero must be one hell of a lover to leave you all starry eyed," she quipped before taking off down the hallway towards the kennels.

"Hilde!" Duo spun around. Behind him Catherine laughed.

"Better quit while you're behind," she said and then went back to her work.

Duo sighed and ran a hand through his bangs. "Since when did my love life become the topic of office gossip?" he muttered as he opened up the drug 'fridge to get the drugs needed for the surgery.

"You should know better than that, Doctor Maxwell. We're women, we were born to gossip," replied Catherine.

"How true," Duo said with a roll of his eyes.

"Don't worry, the gossip stays inside these four walls."

"I should hope so."

"Doctor Maxwell?"

Duo paused as he was leaving the reception area. "Yes?"

"Despite the teasing, it's good to see you happy and in love. Not many people are fortunate enough to find their one, true mate."

"Thank you, Catherine." Duo gave the receptionist a smile of gratitude and then continued on his way to the small operating room and the other vet.

Catherine watched him go, the smile on her face genuine.

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Duo looked up as the vehicle came to a stop. Immediately he recognized the car as being Quatre's, a fact confirmed moments later as the blonde inspector got out of the car and approached Duo.

Standing up, Duo wiped his greasy hands on a rag and smiled. "Hey, Quatre. This a social call or business?"

"Business, Duo." Quatre shook the vet's hand and looked at the scattering of parts on the lawn.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I was going to mow the lawn but Jaws wouldn't go."

"Jaws?"

"The lawnmower."

"Oh."

"I thought it might be the spark plug so I decided to pull it apart and clean it. Then I noticed that the blades need replacing so I'm doing those as well. Damn thing still won't start though."
"Ah. Does it have petrol in it?"

Duo scratched his head. "You know, I never thought to check."

"Duo! You idiot."

Duo gave a sheepish grin. "I'll check that just as soon as I've finished replacing the blades. Now, what can I do for you?"

Quatre's eyes hardened a little as he spoke. "If you can spare the time I'd like you to come with me to a case of neglect. It's a dog. Someone just phoned the office to report that their neighbor had a dog and they haven't seen the neighbor or the animal for a while. The neighbor became concerned about the owner and the dog so they went over to the house. There wasn't any reply to their knocking so they tried around the back. They still didn't have any luck, but they heard a whine come from the garden shed. They went to investigate and called us. I don't know what the state of the dog is but the contact said it wasn't pretty. I think you'd better bring the Lethabarb with you, we may need to euthanase the dog."

Duo frowned. "Does Trowa know?"

"Yes. I'm going to pick him up on the way."

"Okay. Bear with me for a couple of minutes while I go wash up and grab my bag."

Quatre went over to the paddock and 'talked' to Scythe while Duo got cleaned up and fetched the supplies he thought he might need. He let Catherine and Hilde know where he was going and checked he had his pager on him just in case.

"All ready," Duo said as he walked over to Quatre and the mare.

'Let's get going then.'

On the way to picking up Trowa, Quatre gave Duo all the information he had on the case, which wasn't much. Once they had picked Trowa up, the information was repeated again.

"Anyone know where the owner is or what's happened to them?" Trowa asked as they drove along the road.

"Not at this stage. Headquarters was getting as much information from the neighbor as they could before contacting the police and seeing if they can help," replied Quatre. "I haven't heard anything else so I presume they are still trying to find out."

Duo didn't say anything, his mind was too preoccupied with the dog and what sort of condition it was in.

"Here we are," said Quatre as he pulled up outside a modest looking house.

The three climbed out of the car as a person from the house on the left came out to meet them. Quatre walked over. "Mr Lewis?" The man nodded and took Quatre's offered hand. "I'm Inspector Winner from the R.S.P.C.A. You called about a neglected dog?"

"Aye. I haven't seen anyone around for several days and wondered what was going on. I came over and knocked but no one answered. When I went around the back, that's when I heard the whine." Mr Lewis paused for a second, taking a deep breath before he continued. "Dog's in the shed. It's not a nice sight." Mr. Lewis began to lead the way down the side of the house to the back garden.
"I see. You don't have any idea where the owner is?"

"No. I've told all I know to your office and they said they were going to contact the police. I've not heard anything more." Mr. Lewis stopped as they reached the shed. "I'll wait out here if you don't mind."

"That's fine, Mr. Lewis. Thank you." Quatre turned to Duo. "You ready?"

"Lead on." Duo gripped his bag tighter. You didn't know how an animal would react after being neglected. They could be excited, jumping around, or attempting to depending on their condition; or they could be cold and vicious.

"Oh my god."

The stench hit the pair as soon as they opened the door. Quatre placed his hand over his mouth as did Duo and both did their best not to breathe too deeply. Sitting at the back of the shed was the dog. At least that's what Duo thought it was. The poor animal was so thin that pretty much all of its bones were visible jutting through the skin.

"Open a couple of windows," Duo said as he slowly approached the dog.

Quatre moved to the sides and opened every window he could find. Immediately the cool, outside air began to filter through bringing much welcome relief from the smell and adding sunlight to the darkened interior.

A patch of hollowed out dirt sat at the back of the shed, obviously where the dog had lived for the past however many days. Duo guessed it was roughly one to two weeks since the animal had been attended to; the amount of excrement bore testimony to that along with the large water dispenser that contained a healthy growth of slime and not much of anything liquid. Slowly he approached the dog, the animal sitting up and watching him, making no attempt to move. From what Duo could tell, the dog was a Labrador retriever, male, black and roughly a year old.

"Hey there, fella. How you doing?" Duo spoke low and soft, not wanting to startle the animal as he drew closer. The dog's eyes watched him impassively, no sign of animosity evident in his posture. Duo eased a hand forward and the dog stretched out to sniff. A pink tongue came out and licked Duo's hand. Growing in his confidence, Duo shifted closer until he was beside the dog. His hand traveled up over the almost fleshless skull and gently caressed the dog's ears. The dog gave a soft whine and offered a paw.

"You poor thing," mumbled Duo as he took in the dog's condition.

"What do you think, Duo?" Quatre had moved a little closer seeing as how the dog didn't bark, growl or bite.

"From what I can tell, it looks like he hasn't been fed in a while. I'd need to get him outside to have a good look and make a proper diagnosis."

"Has he got a collar on?"

Duo slipped his hand down the dog's neck. "Yeah."

"I'll go get a lead out of the car. Be right back." Quatre disappeared to fetch the lead.

While the Inspector was gone, Duo continued his checking of the animal. It wasn't easy in the dark but he could tell enough to know that despite its ordeal, the dog was nice natured. Quatre returned
and handed Duo the lead which was clipped onto the dog's collar. Duo stood up and gently pulled on the lead. "Come on, up you get."

The dog began to rise, moving stiffly as he brought his legs under himself and stood. He wobbled a bit and tried to walk forwards. The progress out of the shed was slow, the dog, being so undernourished didn't have any energy and it was taking all he had just to place one paw in front of the other. Eventually they made it to the outside where Duo could get a proper look at the animal.

Trowa came over and assisted Duo to get the dog onto the lawn under a shady tree, the animal's eyes had been blinking rapidly and watering with the sudden sunlight after being cooped up in the dark for so long. The dog collapsed gratefully onto its side and lay there panting lightly as Trowa assisted Duo in his inspection of the dog.

Gentle hands explored the body of the dog, working from the head and neck, down over shoulders, legs and rib cage to the back legs. Duo took the dog's temperature and listened to his heart, Trowa calmly petted the animal while Duo worked. Finally having finished, Duo stood up and Quatre approached from where he'd been chatting with Mr Lewis.

"What's the verdict?" Quatre asked.

"He's severely undernourished, dehydrated and he had some sores on the pads of his feet. Other than that his temperature is normal, heart rate good and strong."

"You're not going to put him to sleep, are you?" Trowa asked from where he was sitting, still petting the dog.

"That's up to Quatre," replied Duo. "It's the Inspector's call, not mine."

"What do you think it would take to get him well again?" Quatre eyed the dog. "And is it worth putting him through that treatment or would it be better for the poor thing to be put out of his misery now?"

"The sores on his pads should clear up after minor surgery and a good course of antibiotics. As for the rest of him - a drip will take care of the immediate dehydration and then all he needs is some loving care and lots of good food. He's a nice natured dog, it would be a shame to put him down."

Duo's eyes were on Trowa as he spoke, watching the man interact with the dog. Deep inside he knew Trowa and the animal shelter he ran could nurse the dog back to health, the R.S.P.C.A. would cover Duo's veterinary costs and Trowa shouldn't have any problems in finding the dog a good home once he'd recovered.

Trowa generally dealt with animals that had been abandoned, strays or those whose owner’s couldn't keep them any more for whatever reason. Occasionally he took in rescued cases for the R.S.P.C.A. mainly when their kennels were over crowded. "I'll take him, Quatre."

The Inspector knew his lover was more than capable of taking care of the dog and was quite happy for his partner to have the animal, but Quatre only had jurisdiction to say whether the dog was to be treated or put down. If he decided the animal could be treated it was up to Headquarters to decide if Trowa could take the dog or not.

"I'll call through to base and give them the run down, I'll also see if they have anything on the owner yet. Duo? Would you be able to give me a rough estimate of your costs to treat the dog?"

Duo did a few quick mental calculations and gave Quatre a figure. Quatre argued it wasn't enough, but Duo was adamant that it would cover the costs of the drugs and he'd donate his time. The
R.S.P.C.A. was a non profit organization and Duo figured if donating his time would help the charity out then he was more than happy to do it.

Putting through the call, Quatre moved off a little to stand under a tree. Trowa continued to pet the dog that had now been given a bowl of fresh water and had lapped eagerly at it, splashing a lot of the water over Trowa in the process. Trowa looked up as Duo crouched next to him.

"He's a nice dog, Trowa."

"Yes, he is. It's a shame he's come to this. I'd really like to know the reason behind starving an animal into this state. Considering what this dog's gone through I'm surprised he's as sweet tempered as he is."

"Poor puppy," Duo murmured as he stroked the bumps of the spine. The dog's tail wagged a little and Duo smiled.

Quatre flipped his cell 'phone shut and walked back over to the expectant pair.

"Well?" Trowa all but demanded.

"Headquarters has given the okay. If Duo doesn't mind treating the dog and sorting out the problem with his feet, the society is happy for him to stay with you at the shelter until he's well enough to be re-homed. The society will naturally have the final say on the home he goes to."

"I'll be happy to treat him, Quatre. If you want to take him back to the surgery now I will sort those pads out this afternoon. Depending on the surgery and how he recovers from it, I'd say he will only need to stay with me for a couple of days."

"That's great!" grinned Trowa and turned back to the dog. "You hear that, Jet? You're coming home with us."

"Jet?" Quatre questioned.

"He needs a name and I thought that given his coat color, Jet, as in jet black, would suit him."

Considering that the coat was dull, stiff and had bald patches here and there, Duo thought the dog looked anything but jet black at the moment, but he held his tongue. The animal wasn't going to be put down and Duo was happy about that.

Trowa picked the dog up and carried him over to Quatre's vehicle, placing him on the back seat and climbing in next to him. Quatre thanked Mr Lewis for his trouble and took the man's 'phone number, promising to let him know how the dog got on and if they found out anything regarding the owner. Duo wandered back to the car, noticing that Trowa was already trapped by the dog's soulful, brown eyes.

"Looks like you're going to have a bit of competition, Quat," Duo teased and nodded in the direction of the car where Trowa was fussing over Jet. "Better watch out, first thing is, the dog will be in the house, before you know it, he'll be sleeping in the bedroom, then he'll claim your spot on the bed."

"Not likely," replied Quatre.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that."

"The dog will not be sleeping in the bedroom, nor will it be sleeping on the bed, not unless Trowa plans on becoming a monk."
Duo burst out into laughter and gave his friend a friendly slap to the shoulder. "We will see."

Getting back into the car, Quatre started the vehicle up and drove off towards Duo's practice so that Jet could be treated as soon as possible.

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tbc....

Note: The name 'Jaws' for the lawnmower came from Karina who happened to state in feed back to a previous chapter something along the lines of 'Gertrude the washing machine?! What the hell does he call the lawnmower - Jaws?!' Thanks for the lawnmower's name Karina! *grin*
Chapter 14

Jet was taken back to Duo's practice where the sores on his pads were treated and he was put onto a drip and course of antibiotics. Catherine fussed over the dog just as much as Trowa had, much to Duo and Hilde's amusement. Jet enjoyed the attention though and despite his sorry state still wagged his tail and gave anyone who ventured near enough to scratch his ears a tongue bath.

Catherine personally attended to the dog for the four days he spent in the hospital's kennels, coming in early just to clean up after him, take him for a walk and generally make a fuss of him. Duo had put Jet on a carefully selected diet of meat and biscuits, designed to give the dog maximum nutrition without upsetting the neglected digestive system. They needed to be careful, the dog having been starved for so long the digestive tract would be extremely sensitive and the last thing Jet needed was to be vomiting the food he so desperately needed.

Small meals were given at strictly controlled times, ensuring that Jet received lots of good food in small doses. The dog eagerly ate everything that was put in front of him, causing all of those looking after him to moved by his plight. After four days, Duo released Jet into Trowa's care, Trowa picking the dog up when he collected Catherine after her evening shift.

Duo gave Trowa the remainder of the course of antibiotics that Jet was to take to keep him free from infection as his paws healed. The pads were clean and beginning to granulate with healthy, new tissue, Catherine having been taught how to clean and care for them while Jet was in the care of the hospital.

Quatre came along with Trowa and was amazed at the difference in the dog after only four days. Although he was still extremely thin, there was no doubt he was beginning to put on weight.

Two days after Jet had gone to the animal shelter with Trowa and Catherine, Quatre called around to see Duo.

"Hey, Quat. Another business call?" Duo asked as he let the blonde Inspector into the house. It was early afternoon and Duo was expecting Heero home within the hour.

"Sort of," replied Quatre. "I've got some news on Jet's former owner."

"Ah. Take a seat and fill me in."

Quatre sat at the kitchen table and made himself comfortable, Duo sat opposite after offering Quatre refreshment that was politely declined. Clearing his throat, Quatre began.

"The society passed on the information it had to the police who took over from there. From what the police have told us the owner's name is Mr Cooke. He's in his mid sixties and a widower. He got the dog to keep him company. We believe that he used to put Jet in the shed at night and during the day if he was going out anywhere, mainly to keep the dog from getting out when he wasn't home."

"Sounds responsible enough, but why was Jet starved?"

"As I've just told you, Mr Cooke lives alone and he didn't socialize with his neighbors, preferring to keep to himself. From what the police said, Mr Cook was driving to the mall or somewhere when he had a car accident."
"Shit!"

"Yeah. Although he had ID on him and the hospital checked for next of kin and so forth, they
discovered he didn't have any living relatives. Consequently they didn't have anyone to notify of his
hospitalized state and have simply been caring for him over these past few weeks. No one thought he
might have a pet and the injuries Mr Cooke suffered have left him in a coma, so naturally he hasn't
been able to let anyone know about the dog either."

"That's awful."

"The society won't be pressing any charges as this is something that was completely out of the
owner's control and certainly not intentional."

"You know, Quatre," Duo began as he raised his eyes to meet those of the Inspector. "This is really
sad. If the neighbor hadn't gone over and knocked then Jet would probably be dead now and through
no fault of the dog's or his owner. It makes you think about your own life and how lucky we are. To
have no one, no relations or even to know your neighbors..." Duo's eyes took on a horrified look.
"Imagine if he'd had a heart attack or something. He could have been dead inside that house for
weeks before anyone found him."

"I know," replied Quatre. "The same thoughts had passed through my mind. Unfortunately though,
there isn't a great deal one can do about it other than try to get to know your neighbors. Sadly there
are some people who just want to be left alone and those are the ones I think that need an eye kept on
them."

The pair sat in silence for a few minutes. Duo felt bad for Mr Cooke, as did Quatre, at the same time
he felt sad for Jet too. The dog might well have not been noticed. Unfortunately it was a fact of life,
many elderly people were dying in their homes without no one knowing, simply because people
were too caught up in their own lives to care about simple things like being a friendly neighbor.

Finally Quatre shifted. "I have to get going. I've got to go and file the paperwork. The hospital has
been contacted regarding Mr Cooke's dog and they will call us if and when he comes out of the
coma. Depending on the outcome of that, the society will decide on what's to happen to Jet."

"Sounds very complicated," Duo said as he accompanied the Inspector to the door and outside to
Quatre's car.

"It is and it isn't," replied Quatre. "If Mr Cooke does recover and return home he may want his dog
back in which case the society will have to look at possibly returning Jet. If Mr Cooke is of sound
mind and body, able to care for the dog then the society really has no choice but to return the animal.
Although there would be conditions imposed to ensure that nothing like this could happen again."

"In some ways I'm glad I'm just a vet. I don't think I could do your job, Quatre."

"There are days when I have my own doubts about doing the job too," chuckled Quatre. "Thanks
again, Duo. I'll let you know what happens."

"My pleasure to be able to help, Quat."

The Inspector got into his car, started it up and wound down the window. "Incidentally, Jet has his
own basket and doesn't sleep on the bed."

"Ah, but he's inside the house. He's got his foot firmly in the door now, Quat. It might be the basket
for the moment, but I'll lay bets he's in the bedroom by next week," Duo said and laughed as the
blonde refused to answer, just shaking his head as he drove off.
Quatre waved out the window as he drove away. He'd told Duo that Jet had his own basket and that was the truth; he'd simply neglected to tell the vet that the basket was already in the bedroom.

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Life began to settle into a routine once more over the next few weeks. The practice continued to prosper, more surgical procedures were being booked and both Duo and Hilde had a steady stream of clients during consulting hours. Hilde had proven to be a valuable asset and had commandeered her own following of clients. Duo was still as popular as ever, his gentle, caring manner finding favor with those that sought the vet's help with their animals. Duo still did the larger portion of the call outs and large animal work, although Hilde did her share from time to time as well. There were some occasions though when it needed male strength to treat a particular animal.

Catherine was an instant hit with the clients, treating each one with quiet respect and confidence, she soon had them eating out of her hand; even those who could be hard to get to part with their money found themselves eager to pay their bills once Catherine had applied her charms. She also had Nrobbuts behaving itself perfectly for her, something that irked Duo to no end. He still swore that the computer was alive and had simply been created to make his life hell. He’d tried twice more to work with the cursed machine, the first had resulted in the loss of all client files from F to J and took Catherine the better part of an afternoon to recover. The second attempt almost wiped the entire hard drive and took all of Catherine and Hilde's negotiation skills to get Duo to put down the humane killer and not shoot the computer.

Heero had worked until one in the morning to get Nrobbuts back online and working properly.

Now, Duo didn't go anywhere near the hated machine, he preferred to glare at it from a safe distance instead.

Jet recovered and put weight on at an astounding rate. Catherine brought him back to the surgery for the final check on his pads and Duo was pleased to see the difference in the dog. Jet's coat was rich and glossy, shining sleekly, a testament to the amount of shampooing and brushing that Catherine had obviously done. While he was still a little thin, Duo knew it was only a matter of time before the dog was back to the full glory of a Labrador retriever. Catherine had also done some basic training with Jet and the dog happily gave a demonstration of his new found skills. He sat, lay down, stayed, walked to heel, played dead and shook hands.

True to his word, Quatre had notified Duo as soon as he had more information on Mr Cooke. Sadly, the elderly man hadn't awoken from his coma, he'd passed away peacefully in his sleep a week and a half after Jet's rescue. Duo had been saddened by the news but found comfort in Heero's strong arms and soothing words. Though he hadn't known the man it was the circumstances that had Duo upset. To think that someone could simply pass from existence without anyone knowing gave him the heebie jeebies and it took Heero a lot of soft words and soothing caresses to convince Duo that the same thing wouldn't happen to either of them when they grew older.

Treize and Heero had attended another four shows since the disaster with Taurus. Sandrock was going well and had almost gained enough points to move him up a grade. Goose was jumping consistently, taking home his fair share of the winnings and Short Duck hadn't escaped and run riot since his escapade at the beginning of the season. Taurus had been scratched from competing, both Treize and Heero agreeing the horse would need several months of slow, basic work to get his confidence back. Zero was going well and had yet to reach his top. He was placing regularly in the top three of each event he entered and Heero was extremely pleased with the way the gray was shaping up. He figured Zero should reach his peak around the middle of the season, right around the time the selectors would be out and about.
Shinigami had accepted being lunged and would now walk, trot and canter on either rein to voice commands. Heero was happy with the colt's progress, the intelligence of the youngster showing through each time Heero did something new with him. The playful nature of the colt continued to grow as well, Heero suffering the bruises of well placed nips on his arms when Shini was able to get one in. There wasn't anything malicious or vicious about the bites, it was simply the way horses interacted with each other and naturally Shini thought of Heero as part of the 'herd' and treated him the same.

Scythe was beginning to show her age a little. Gray hairs had begun to come through in her coat around her muzzle and eyes but those eyes never lost their sparkle of life. She was content to spend her days grazing in the paddocks and being fussed over by Duo at night. Duo managed to take her out once a week for a ride, something the pair of them enjoyed immensely. Duo found it to be very relaxing after a stressful day in the surgery, Scythe simply enjoyed the change of scenery. Sometimes Heero would join them and the rides were even more special for Duo then. They could forget about the world around them, the stress of their jobs and daily chores and just enjoy each other's company.

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Spring was just around the corner, the winter having been a mild one this season, something Duo appreciated. The vet wasn't overly keen on the cold and wet weather, especially in the early hours of the morning when he happened to have a call out. Heero was slowly getting used to having Duo, the human popsicle, crawl back into their bed and snuggle up to him in an attempt to thaw out. Call outs, especially night ones, were one of the few things about being a vet that Duo wasn't fond of, but it was heaven to come back to a warm bed and the strong arms of his boyfriend. The times of when he'd returned to a cold bed were a thing of the past and that's where Duo wanted them to remain.

Mother Nature started to awaken the sleeping vegetation, trees and plants began to put out new shoots in preparation for the warmer weather. With the onset of spring, Duo knew the practice would also be busier than ever. Spring heralded the arrival of new life in the animal world and the practice always seemed to be running flat out. With Salsbury being in the country there were still quite a few farms around, not as many as there had been in years past, but more than enough to provide the practice with a large chunk of work.

Heero's alarm went off and he flopped an arm out from under the covers to hit the off switch. The noise ceased after a moment and Heero yawned. Duo grunted and burrowed deeper into the mattress. The shrill ringing of the phone exploded in the room and Duo gave a moan as he surfaced and scrabbled for the receiver.

"Maxwell Veterinary Practice."

Heero began to rise, sitting up and sliding to the side of the bed and lowering his feet to the floor. He stretched and scratched his chest, half an ear on Duo's conversation.

"How long has she been like that for?"

Heero rubbed his eyes.

"I see. No, no, that's quite all right, Mr Townley. I'll be right out. What was the address again?"

Heero turned slightly as Duo was scribbling down an address. Looked like his lover wasn't going to get a lie in this morning.

"Thank you. I'll be there as soon as I can. Good bye, Mr Townley." Duo replaced the receiver and flopped back to the pillows with a groan, one arm covering his eyes.
"Call out?" asked Heero.

"Yeah."

"What's up?" Heero stood and stretched his body, muscles sliding easily under the rich skin.

"Me, if you keep that up," Duo snickered as he peeked out from under his arm at his nude lover. Heero turned and gave the vet a smirk, noting the slight tenting of the bed clothes. "As much as a romp in the sheets sounds inviting, I'm afraid neither one of us has the time."

"Shame," Duo grinned as he moved his arm away from his face and then gave a wide yawn.

"What's the problem?" Heero walked over to the closet and began to get his clothes out ready to dress.

"One of Mr Townley's pigs is farrowing. She went into labor about an hour or so ago and has been straining for a while. So far though, no sign of any piglets."

"Any ideas on what the problem could be?" Heero pulled the sweats over his hips and reached for his worn T-shirt.

"I'd say there's a piglet stuck." Duo managed to drag himself from the bed. "What a lovely way to start the day, shoving my hand up a sow's birth canal."

Heero chuckled. "Could be worse, could be a cow."

"Yeah, you got that right." Duo stretched. "I guess I can always have a bacon sandwich for breakfast when I get back," Duo snickered and wandered around the bed to partake of a morning kiss.

"I think there's some pork sausages in the freezer," Heero said as the kiss broke.

"In that case, we'll have them for dinner." Duo rubbed his groin enticingly against Heero.

Swatting his boyfriend's ass, Heero laughed. "If you're a good boy I'll eat your sausage tonight as well." To add emphasis to his teasing words, Heero reached down and gave Duo's half hard cock a light squeeze.

Duo groaned and thrust into Heero's hand. "I'll hold you to that," he said softly.

Heero gave his lover another squeeze then let go of the hardening flesh. "I'd better get a move on, the nags are waiting for their breakfast and you have Miss Piggy to deal with."

Duo snorted. "Miss Piggy? Heero, I don't know where you got your sense of humor from, but I'd be demanding a refund."

Heero didn't have a reply to that one.

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Duo looked down at the row of pink piglets and a smile crossed his features. Picking up the towel, he dried his arms off and rolled down his sleeves.

"That's a grand sight," stated Mr Townley as he watched the piglets all fighting for the best teat.

"It's something I'll never tire of," replied Duo. "The miracle of birth is certainly a lovely thing to
"You got that right. Thank you, young man, for coming out and seeing to the pig."

"You're welcome, Mr Townley. I'm just happy it all turned out okay."

When Duo had arrived the sow was still straining hard, but nothing had appeared. He'd lubricated his hand and fingers, slipping gently inside the sow's vagina and moving carefully along the passage until he'd found the reason for the delay. It was as he'd expected. There was one, large piglet stuck in the cervix. With the aid of a soft rope slipped over the bottom jaw of the piglet and a generous amount of lubrication applied to the cervix, Duo had managed to gently pull the piglet free, assisted by the sow's pushing. Duo suspected the piglet was a boar, his suspicions confirmed once the wriggling, pink bundle was delivered. With the obstruction out of the way, the sow continued to strain, popping out another piglet roughly every ten minutes until there were fifteen in total. A quick, internal exploration revealed no more piglets and Duo began to clean himself up.

"Would you care to have a bite of breakfast with me and the missus, Doctor Maxwell?"

Duo glanced at his watch. "I'm afraid I can't, Mr Townley. I have to get back to the practice, morning consultations start in an hour and we have quite a few appointments booked. Thanks for the invite though." Duo picked up his bag and turned to leave the piggery.

Mr Townley saw Duo to his car, thanking the vet once again and then waving as the car disappeared down the drive. With a broad smile, he returned to the sty and gazed at the sow and her family until his wife came out and dragged him inside for his breakfast.

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Heero closed his fingers on the reins, checking the speed of Taurus' trot. The horse responded, shortening his stride but maintaining his impulsion. Turning his head, Heero looked for the grid then rode Taurus in a wide arc to bring him in straight. The grid was simply a line of cavaletties, each a foot high and set four feet apart. Still keeping the impulsion, Heero brought Taurus around and faced the line of poles. The horse eyed the row but didn't break his gait.

Careful to keep a light contact and legs steady on the horse's sides, Heero rode Taurus directly at the center of the cavaletties. The horse pricked up his ears but remained calm, his trot staying at the same speed as he approached the line. Heero raised his weight slightly out of the saddle and applied gentle pressure with his legs, allowing his hands to slip slightly forwards as Taurus began to traverse the grid. The horse lowered his head and neck, the muscles of his back softened and rounded as his legs raised to trot cleanly over the grid of foot high cavaletties.

As they reached the end so Heero sat back down in the saddle and ran a soothing hand along the neck of the animal. "Good boy," he encouraged and prepared to bring Taurus around for a second try.

Standing by the fence, Treize watched the schooling progressing. He was pleased to see the horse responding so well, although the real test would come once they put some decent sized fences in front of the horse. So far though Taurus had been as good as gold, listening to Heero and doing everything he was asked without the fight of previous times. Maybe there was hope for the chestnut yet.

Heero took Taurus through the cavaletti grid four more times before bringing the horse to a walk and giving him rein to stretch out his head and neck. He patted the horse and praised him with soft words. If things continued to progress along these lines they should be able to increase the height of
the jumps a little and start to take Taurus over them at a canter. If all continued to go well then the
next step was to put the fences up to a more jumpable height and hope that Taurus would continue to
respond to his rider and not get over excited or panic.

Turning, Heero rode towards the fence and Treize.

Watching carefully, nothing escaped Treize's eye. He could see the horse was much more relaxed
and listening to his rider. He smiled at Heero as the rider brought the chestnut to a halt beside him.
"Nicely ridden," Treize commented. "I think there may be hope for him yet."

"It's going to take a lot more work, but I'm confident he'll be a different horse once he starts jumping
courses again."

"I'd say we keep him on the cavaletties for another few sessions, widening them out to canter strides.
If he's still going calmly then I'll set up a grid of jumps about two foot high and we'll see how he
handles that."

"I agree," replied Heero as he dismounted and loosened the girth. "In one way it's probably a good
thing he had that shake up."

"One hell of a way to get him to listen to his rider though. Personally I prefer much less spectacular
ways," chuckled Treize as he patted the chestnut.

"He's not the sort of horse to do things by halves," laughed Heero.

"You got that right." Treize's cell phone began to ring and he fished in his pocket for the device.
"Khushrenada."

Heero turned away and began to run up his stirrups and undo the drop noseband, giving Taurus the
okay to relax. He didn't intentionally listen in on Treize's conversation, but it was a bit hard not to
overhear when the man was standing right next to you.

"When did they arrive?"

Heero busied himself checking the horse over.

"I see. Tomorrow will be fine, I look forward to it."

Heero began to remove the front jumping boots.

"Oh, if it's okay I'd like to bring my current student with me, I think he'd find them interesting too."

Heero's ears pricked up a little and he straightened, jumping boots in one hand.

"Fine. I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks." Treize pushed the button to disconnect the call and slipped
the cell back into his pocket. With a thoughtful look on his face, Treize turned to Heero. "Care to
come with me tomorrow and have a look at a couple of new horses?"

"New horses?" Heero began to lead Taurus towards the stable block, Treize walking beside him.

"Yes. Most of the horses in the stables come from the Peacecraft stud," Treize began and gave Heero
a brief rundown on the arrangement he had with Relena regarding the horses, showjumping and
Treize's way of living from his sport. "She's just come back from Europe where she's bought some
new stock. A stallion and two mares. They arrived a few weeks ago and have been in quarantine.
The quarantine period is up and the horses arrived at the stud two days ago. I did tell Relena I
wanted to see them once she had them home and that was her on the phone to tell me they have arrived and we're invited over tomorrow to see them for ourselves.”

"Sounds interesting. What's the breeding?" Heero asked as he began to remove Taurus' saddle, the stable boy appearing to take over. Heero handed the chestnut over and followed Treize into the tack room where they helped themselves to a soda from the small ‘fridge.

Treize related to Heero all that Relena had told him about the new acquisitions, their breeding, what they had done and Relena's hopes for them in the stud's breeding program.

Heero had to admit, it all sounded great in theory and he was curious to see the Peacecraft stud for himself now that he'd learnt a little about it and the bloodlines that came out of the stud.

"I'm really keen to have a look at this stallion, Peacemillion. If he's anything like his father he should be a good sire. I'm also itching to have a ride on him. If he's any good I'm hoping to persuade Relena to let me take him out to a few shows." Treize reclined back in a chair as he spoke.

"I've heard quite a bit about Millionaire and he's supposed to have thrown some good stock," stated Heero as he leaned against the table. "You think she will let you take the stallion out and jump him?"

"I'd like to try him out first, see what his potential is like and if it's good then it would make sense to get him out to a few shows, grade him up and then put him back to stud. People will have a chance to see what he's like and he could make Relena a tidy profit on the side if she stands him at public stud to a few select mares."

Even Heero could see the logic in that. It would have cost Relena a small fortune to not only purchase the horses, but to have them imported and quarantined as well. If she could recoup some of that money by standing the stallion at stud then all the better. But as Treize said, the stud fee and horse's value would be greatly increased if he was to be taken out around the shows and proved his worth in competition.

"We will go over there tomorrow, mid morning, and take a look."

"Thanks. I'll look forward to it."

"Good." Treize tossed his empty can into the trash. "I'm going to put Epyon through his paces and then take Goose out for a bush ride. Sandrock could do with a bit of a break from the jumping so why don't you take him out for a bush ride now?"

"Will do." Heero tossed his own empty soda can into the trash and went to fetch the bay, his mind going over the visit to the Peacecraft stud the following day.

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tbc...
Chapter 15

"That you, Heero?" Duo called out from the laundry where he was busy folding socks.

"Yeah," Heero replied and then appeared in the doorway, a smile on his face as he observed his partner and the domestic scene. "You'd make someone a good housewife," Heero snickered as he walked over to his lover and gave him a kiss.

"I am not a housewife," growled Duo. "Why do people always think I'm the more feminine type? Must be the hair. Maybe I should get it cut."

"Don't you dare!" Heero all but shouted.

"At least then I wouldn't be mistaken for a woman."

Heero slid his hand to the front of Duo's jeans and gave his crotch a gentle squeeze. "You're definitely not female," he purred.

"Mmm..." Duo moaned and rocked his hips. "What's gotten into you this afternoon? You're looking and acting rather pleased with yourself."

Heero moved back and leaned against the dryer. "I'm going with Treize tomorrow to visit the Peacecraft stud and see some new horses."

"Peacecraft... Peacecraft... I think I've heard that name somewhere before but I can't place where."

Heero gave Duo a brief run down on what Treize had told him about the Peacecraft stud and the role it played in Treize's occupation.

"Sounds interesting," Duo replied. "You'll have to let me know what the horses are like." Duo picked up the now folded laundry and handed Heero a pile. "Wanna put those away for me, please?"

"Sure thing, honey," Heero replied with a cheeky smile.

"I'll give you honey," Duo growled.

"Okay, maybe not honey, but what about stud muffin?"

A pair of briefs to Heero's face was his reply. "Ohh, I always wanted to get into your pants," Heero continued to tease.

"Heero!"

"Okay, okay. I'll stop now."

"Good."

"I'll start dinner after I put these away, shall I, sweet pea?"

"Arrgghhh!"

Seeing Duo eyeing the iron, Heero took off at a run, his laughter echoing down the hall.
"All set?" Treize asked as he climbed in the driver's side of the car.

"Yes," Heero replied as he buckled up his seat belt.

Treize started the car and backed out of the garage. Putting the shift into 'first', he drove off down the long driveway and out onto the main road and in the direction of the Peacecraft stud. The drive wasn't a long one, the stud being located just a few kilometers from Treize's stables. The ride passed in relative silence, Heero asking the odd question about the horses and Treize doing his best to answer them.

As they drew closer to the stud so Heero's curiosity got the better of him. "You said a woman by the name of Relena runs this stud by herself?"

Treize chuckled. "In a sense, yes. She's a marvel when it comes to bloodlines. She seems to have a sixth sense about breeding, knowing which crosses will produce good quality stock and which will produce only mediocre stuff. She plans out which mares will go to which stallions and what will happen with the resulting foals. Naturally she has a good staff to run the place, she wouldn't be able to handle it by herself."

"How many horses does she have?"

"With this new stallion that will bring the sires to four. There's roughly fifteen brood mares and a range of young stock. I'd guess about ten yearlings, twelve two year olds, six three year olds and about three four year olds."

"Shit! That's a lot of horses."

"It is. Although the brood mares and young stock are mostly paddocked. The stallions of course are all stabled along with the three and four year olds. Those are the youngsters she intends to have me break in and educate. Once they get to three, I generally pop over and go through them, assessing which she should keep and those she should sell. She doesn't usually sell off anything until it's three, unless she gets a really good offer."

That gave Heero quite a bit to think about. The woman must have some pretty sound knowledge to run a successful stud such as this.

Treize turned off the main road and along a smaller side road before turning again and then entering under a wide arch and following a tree lined driveway. "Here we are," he said as he drove the car around the back of the impressive looking sandstone house.

Heero's eyes widened as he took in the size of the place. He'd thought Treize's place was impressive, but this… Well shit! It was the sort of set up Heero would love to have for himself some day, unfortunately he couldn't ever see that day arriving. Behind the house stood the stables, also made from the same, pale sandstone. The area was set out in a 'U' shape with a grassed area in the middle. Along all three sides, Heero could see loose boxes, some with inquisitive looking heads hanging over the doors.

"Come on, I'll take you for a look around in a minute," said Treize as he got out of the car.

Heero opened the door and got out, following Treize towards the house, his mind still on the stable area and what was inside it. As they approached the rear of the house so the door opened and a young woman stood on the step.
"Treize, it's so good to see you again." The woman stepped down and shook hands with Treize.

"It's good to see you again too, Relena," Treize replied.

Turning her attention from Treize, she spoke again. "This must be Mr. Yuy, the student you currently have."

"Yes, yes, he is. Heero Yuy, this is Relena Peacecraft, the lady that runs this fine establishment. Relena, this is Heero Yuy." Treize stepped aside as he made his introductions and Heero stepped forwards to shake the woman's hand.

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Peacecraft," Heero said as he shook the small hand offered to him.

Relena's eyes lit up as she took in the sight of the young man before her. She let her gaze wander over him as if appraising a new horse she intended to purchase before remembering her manners. "The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Yuy, and please, call me Relena."

"Then you must call me Heero."

"Thank you." Relena's eyes continued to wander, enjoying the visual feast before her. Something fluttered in her stomach when she noticed the deep blue of the young man's eyes. Now here was a specimen she would love to have in her stable. He certainly was a fine looking stud.

Heero felt the weight of the woman's gaze and it made him uncomfortable. He didn't like being appraised like a piece of horse flesh. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and looked at Treize.

"The horses, Relena. I'd like Heero to have a look at them as well if that's okay with you," said Treize, sensing the tension in Heero.

"Huh? Oh, yes. The horses," Relena said as she brought her mind back from where it had wandered. "Just bear with me a moment while I get changed. If you like, go on through to the stables, I'm sure that Walker will show you around while I change."

"Thank you. I think Heero would like to have a look at your set up," Treize said as he looked to Heero for conformation. He could see the young rider was keen to get a closer look at the stables and their contents.

Nodding, Heero said. "I'd love to."

Relena went a little red at Treize's words and the other way she could have interpreted them. She wouldn't have minded this hunk having a look at her set up in the least. "Go on ahead then, I'll be with you shortly."

"Thank you," Heero muttered and turned rather quickly, impatient to get away from the woman who was giving him the creeps.

Treize also turned and began to walk towards the stables. Once they were out of ear shot of Relena, Treize spoke. "Don't let her unnerve you, Heero. She studies everyone as if they were a prize piece of horse flesh, it's just her way of assessing you."

"Could have fooled me," Heero growled softly.

Treize laughed. "I wouldn't worry too much, she's devoted to her livestock." Further discussion was cut short as they entered the stable area and a middle aged man came over to greet them.
"Mr Khushrenada, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"Hello, Walker. How many times do I have to tell you to call me Treize?"

The wizened groom smiled as he shook hands with Treize. "I take it you've come to see the new arrivals?"

"Yes, we have. Walker, this is Heero Yuy, my current student. Heero, this is Walker, Relena's head groom and stud master."

"Pleased to meet you, Walker." Heero extended his hand, taking an instant liking to the man.

"Nice to meet you too, Mr. Yuy. How are you finding Treize as a mentor and instructor?"

Heero smiled. "He's good, fair and has a lot of knowledge," replied Heero honestly.

"You would do well to stick with him, young man. He can teach you a lot." Walker added a wink to his words.

Treize had begun to go a little red under the praise and shifted uncomfortably. "Walker? Would you mind showing us around while we wait for Relena? Naturally we will wait to see the new horses until she's with us, but I know Heero is keen to see the set up as well as the stock."

"It will be my pleasure," replied Walker. "If you would kindly follow me I'll show you the three stallions we currently have standing at stud."

Following behind the groom, Heero's head was constantly turning, taking in all the goings on around him.

"This is the stud's senior stallion, Windjammer," Walker began as he stopped outside a loose box where a bay head looked over at them. "He's thoroughbred and we cross him over the warmblood mares to give something with a little lighter bone but speed as well." Walker went inside and brought the stallion out for the two men to see.

Heero had to admit, he was a nice example of the breed. Once they'd had a good look at him, Walker put him back in the box and moved down a few to where a liver chestnut head was watching them with interest.

"This is Fire Fox. He's a Hanoverian stallion originally used for dressage. He's our more influential sire adding lift and elegance to the mares he's bred to and generally passing on his movement to his foals. One of his sons was a bronze medalist at the world championships and another is set to make it to the short list for the Olympics." Walker brought the stallion out for Heero to see.

Dancing on the end of his lead rope, the liver chestnut showed off, knowing he was being appraised. Heero took in the smooth planes of the muscles, the long slope of the shoulder and powerful hocks. "What level did he get to?" Heero asked.

"Grand Prix."

"He's certainly a lovely horse." Heero continued to gaze at the animal.

"I like to think so." Relena appeared behind them. "Have you seen Horace yet?"

"Horace?" Heero questioned, his eyes wide.

Walker chuckled as he put Fox away. "Horace is our Trakehner stallion. He was a showjumper
before being purchased for the stud. We use both him and Wind for the breeding of our showjumpers." Walker led them along past two more loose boxes and then stopped. Leaning over the box door he spoke to the horse inside. "Come on, Horace, you have visitors."

A brown head appeared over the door and looked curiously at the people. Walker clipped a lead rope to his halter and brought him out. "Generally he's well behaved, although he does have a tendency to get a little hot headed at times."

"He's Taurus' sire," said Treize.

_That would explain a little of Taurus' temperament then_, Heero thought. "Why do you call him Horace?" Heero asked as he ran his eye over the animal.

"His registered name is Westgate Hallmark, much easier to call him Horace though."

Heero had to agree.

"Where's this new stallion of yours, Relena?" Treize asked as Walker put Horace back into his stable. Treize had seen the other stallions before and was eager to get a look at the new one.

"Peacemillion is down here," Relena replied and led the way.

A gray face appeared over a door at the approaching footsteps. Heero's eyes widened considerably. The head was finely chiseled, broad forehead, deep expressive eyes and a tapering muzzle. Heero was certainly keen to see more. Walker disappeared into the stallion's box with a lead rope, Treize leaned against the stable wall and began to quiz Relena.

"I know his breeding and you mentioned something about him having done the European circuit?"

"That's right. He's competed at A grade level with several wins to his credit," Relena replied.

Heero listened with half an ear, the majority of his attention on the stallion that Walker was leading out. Standing sixteen three, he was an impressive horse. His coat was lightly dappled with darker gray blending to almost black on his legs from the knees and hocks down. His mane and tail also held a lot of black. The neck came out of his shoulders with a graceful arch, the ribs were well sprung indicating good heart and lung room. The back was short and leading into one of the best hindquarters Heero had ever seen. He found himself comparing the stallion to his own beloved Zero. Peacemillion was heavier built than Zero and his shoulders weren't as good, although Zero's hindquarters were not as well proportioned as Peacemillion's. While this stallion was certainly a quality horse, Heero wouldn't have swapped his Zero for him. Idly, Heero mused over what a cross between a Zero daughter and Peacemillion would turn out like; not that Zero had sired anything other than Shinigami and he was turning out to be something special. If Shini had been a mare and Heero had crossed that mare with Peacemillion he knew he would have something pretty spectacular. His ears pricked up when he heard the word 'foals' spoken by Treize.

"He's only covered twenty mares, five in his first season and fifteen in the second. Four of the five mares foaled successfully, three fillies and a colt, all yearlings now. The second crop of foals has resulted in six colts, seven fillies, one mare slipped and one didn't take," Relena stated as Treize looked over the horse. "We won't know what his progeny are like for a few years yet, not until they're out competing."

"Did you get a look at any of his offspring?" Treize asked.

"Yes, I did. I've got some photos of them back at the house. I'll show you afterwards."
"Thanks. What do you think of him, Heero?" Treize had watched the young rider eyeing the horse and was keen to know what Heero's thoughts were.

"He's certainly a quality animal, good conformation and he seems to have a nice temperament as well," Heero replied. "I'd like to see his paces though."

"So would I. Relena? Would it be an inconvenience if I were to ask to ride him?" Treize said.

Relena laughed. "Treize, you've been breaking your neck to ride him ever since I first told you about him. Walker, would you mind fetching a saddle and bridle for him, please?"

Walker nodded and tied the stallion up, disappearing to fetch the tack and returning a few moments later with a lovely forward cut showjumping saddle and snaffle bridle. While Walker saddled the horse, Heero kept his attention focused on the animal. He could feel the weight and heat of Relena's eyes on him from time to time and it was making him really uncomfortable.

Once the stallion was saddled, Walker led him through a gateway on one side of the stable block and down a small walkway to a paddock that contained a dressage arena and some jumps. Heero followed along behind, letting Treize do the talking and keep Relena engaged in conversation. While Heero didn't dislike the woman, he wasn't over keen on her either. He just wished she would stop eyeing him off as if he were a prospect for her stable.

Reaching the paddock, Walker entered and then checked the horse's girth before handing the reins to Treize. "He's only had light work since arriving, just enough to keep him reasonably fit. We haven't jumped him yet so I don't know what he's like in that regard. On the flat he's calm and pretty responsive." Walker stood to the side to allow Treize to adjust his stirrups.

Happy that all was okay, Treize mounted the gray and settled into the saddle. Gathering up his reins, he closed his legs on the horse's sides and Peacemillion walked off calmly.

With Treize now on the stallion's back, Heero had no one to distract Relena from him and he found himself caught in her clutches. "How long have you been a student with Treize? Do you like it there? Which horses are you riding?" These were just some of the questions Heero found himself having to answer. He answered as best he could, short and to the point. Then the questions began to change and Heero found his dislike for the woman starting to fester.

"Where do you live, Heero? With your wife? Or do you have a girlfriend?"

"I'm not married and don't have a girlfriend. I share a house with Duo Maxwell, the vet," Heero replied.

"I don't think I've heard of him. Does he treat horses?"

"He owns the Maxwell Veterinary hospital, and yes, he does treat horses."

"Ah. I use the Oakford Equine hospital when I need a vet. I think it pays to use a specialist in the field."

Heero could feel his hackles beginning to rise. This woman didn't even know Duo and yet the tone of her voice was condescending. "Doctor Maxwell is an excellent vet. I wouldn't have my horses treated by anyone else," Heero stated, a little stronger than he'd intended.

"Oh, I'm sure he's probably fine with your average animal, but here we need someone that knows exactly what they're doing. These animals are worth a lot of money."
Heero kept his mouth shut, he didn't trust his voice right now. Biting his tongue he made a point of turning away from the woman and watching Treize who had finished warming up the gray and was getting ready to jump.

"Treize is an excellent horseman, you will learn a lot from him," Relena said, seemingly oblivious to Heero's ignoring of her. "We have some really good four year olds ready to be taken on in the next couple of months." Relena stepped a little closer and rested her hand on Heero's arm.

The touch caused Heero to flinch a little but he resisted the urge to turn tail and run, pretending he hadn't noticed and concentrating on watching Treize who was taking the gray around the jumping course. "He's got a nice jump on him," Heero said in an attempt to change the subject. "Calm and with a lot of scope."

"Yes, he's not bad, but getting back to these four year olds. I'm pretty sure I could be persuaded to let you have first pick of them, select one or two that you'd like to work on." Relena's voice had settled to a purr.

Heero began to feel nauseous.

"I think you would be able to take a couple of them to the top. I'll have to stop by some time and see you ride. I'll bet you're excellent in the saddle."

Now Heero knew for certain that the woman was coming on to him, if the blatant innuendo didn't say it, the caressing of his arm certainly did. He cursed himself for revealing that he wasn't married or had a girlfriend in their earlier conversation. But he couldn't exactly come out and tell the woman he was involved in a relationship - with another man. Fortunately for Heero, Treize decided to call a halt to his ride and brought Peacemillion over to where they were standing.

"He's got a great jump on him, Relena," Treize commented as he dismounted and patted the gray.

"I did tell you he'd competed with success on the European circuit. If I didn't think he was worth it I wouldn't have bought him," Relena replied.

"I'd like to take him out and jump him at a couple of shows if that's okay with you?" Treize handed the horse over to Walker who had returned from the stables.

"I don't know," Relena began. "I want to put him over a few mares this season and see what he's throwing. If he's out competing chances are he won't be as fertile as he could be."

"That's bullshit, Relena, and you know it. You would have had him fertility tested before purchasing him and competing won't alter that by much. If you're only planning on putting him to a few mares then it shouldn't make that much of a difference. Besides, getting him out there and competing will give him exposure to the public and when next breeding season comes around you can take outside mares to him and that will help to pay for his upkeep." Treize was doing his best to convince Relena as they walked back to the stable block.

"I'll have to think about it. I really don't want him leaving the property."

Sensing the woman's resolve weakening, Treize moved in for the kill. "He wouldn't have to leave your property. I can come over here and put him over the jumps once or twice a week. On the days in-between, Walker or one of your other employees can work him on the flat."

"Well..."

"If I can't get over to ride him I'm sure Heero here could pop over on my behalf and put him over the
"Eh?" Heero hadn't been paying that much attention to the conversation, but upon hearing his name his ears pricked up to see what Treize was getting him into now.

"Heero's an excellent rider and would handle Peacemillion without any trouble. If I didn't have confidence in him I wouldn't have suggested him or taken him on as a student in the first place." Treize gave Relena a confident look.

As Treize's words sunk in so Relena's face lit up. The prospect of seeing this gorgeous stud was too tempting. "Okay. I'll sort out finer details with you over the next few days. But..." Relena gave Treize a warning look. "He's only to compete in a few shows, just enough to gain the interest of people and that's all."

"That's fine," Treize replied. With Relena consenting to the horse competing, Treize could argue for the different shows later. Better to leave things as they were for now.

The three walked back to the stables and then out to the paddocks to see the brood mares. Treize was happy he'd managed to get his way to jump Peacemillion. Relena was delighted that she was going to be spending more time with Heero and hoping to add him to her 'stable', while Heero was trying to figure out just what the hell was going on here and how was he going to dissuade this woman that seemed determined to have him and stuck to him like a leech.

~ * ~

tbc......

Note: More information on the horse breeds Trakehner, Hanoverian, Holsteiner and Thoroughbred can be found here; http://www.imh.org/imh/bw/eur.html
Having seen the brood mares, especially the two new ones, Treize and Heero had accompanied an insistent Relena back to the house for refreshments and to have a look at the foals Peacemillion had sired. Relena had taken great pride in showing Heero a lot of the photographs of various horses she’d bred over the years, Heero had done his best to remain polite and feign interest. It hadn't been easy to do though with Relena continuously finding an excuse to touch him or get closer. Heero would have enjoyed looking at the photos had he been allowed to peruse them in peace.

Finally, Treize announced they needed to be going, much to Heero's relief and Relena's disappointment. They bid their farewells, Relena doing her best to find out when she could next see Heero, Heero managing to avoid an answer. They got into the car and drove away, Relena waving behind them. Heero slumped in his seat and let out a long suffering breath.

"What did you think, Heero?" Treize asked, an amused smile on his face.

"Stables are set up perfectly, actually the whole establishment is set out well and run just as efficiently," Heero replied. "The stock are top quality too and I really like the stallions."

"Relena does know her bloodlines and a good prospect when she sees one."

Heero wasn't sure if Treize was teasing him or not. "I'd prefer it if she were to keep her interest on the horses," he growled.

Treize laughed. "Don't worry too much about her, Heero. She does have a tendency to eye off every available male as a prospective boyfriend."

"I already have a boyfriend."

"I know that, but she doesn't - yet."

Heero shot his boss a warning look.

"Don't worry, Heero. I'm not about to tell her your secret. I might be a lot of things, but suicidal isn't one of them."

"Thank you," Heero muttered.

"Look, if she's bothering you that much I won't insist that you go over there and work Peacemillion when I can't. I'll figure something out."

"You sure?"

"Heero, I like you, you're an excellent rider and I have no intentions of allowing Relena to cause you to quit. You're one of the better riders I've had through my stable in a long time, you have potential and a natural gift when it comes to horses. I'm not about to see that gift get thrown away simply because Miss Peacraft has her beady little eye on you. It's not my place to inform her you're not interested, or the reasons why you're not interested. Only you can do that. I will, however, back you up and do my best to keep the two of you apart and the peace maintained."

Heero began to blush a little at the compliments regarding his riding and then, when Treize
continued, Heero realized he'd found a good ally in Treize. "Thanks, Treize. I really appreciate that."

"My pleasure, Heero. Now, what say we try Taurus over a small course when we get back?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Great."

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Duo turned the lights off in the reception area and made his way through to the kennels. He checked on the dog, Chaos, who was still sleeping peacefully, having undergone surgery that afternoon to have his broken leg set and pinned. Moving over to another, smaller kennel, Duo opened the door and gently rubbed the side of the cat's face, a loud purring his response. "Feeling better, Tigs?" The cat just purred louder. Duo chuckled softly and ran an eye over the five kittens all curled up in a heap in the corner. Tigs had been brought in that afternoon for an emergency caesarean. She'd gone into labor and after straining for an hour without any result, her owner had 'phoned the surgery in a blind panic. Tigs had been brought in within half an hour of the call and Hilde had operated.

Five healthy kittens were born shortly after, Tigs stitched up and left to recover. Her owner had been ecstatic to say the least, having feared she was going to lose her beloved pet. All being well, Tigs and her family would be able to go home tomorrow.

"Night, Tigs," Duo said as he secured the kennel door and checked the monitor was on. Closing the door to the kennels, Duo switched off the last of the lights and locked the surgery behind him. Walking down the short path that separated the surgery from the house, Duo spotted a chink of light spilling out from the kitchen curtains. His heart warmed as he thought about his lover, probably making a coffee as he knew what time Duo usually made it back to the house after evening consults. As he neared the back door so the smell of dinner invaded his nostrils and his stomach gave a loud rumble. He hadn't realized how hungry he was.

Heero looked up and smiled as Duo entered the kitchen. "How were the consults?" he asked as he picked up a steaming mug and sat it on the table ready for Duo. Turning back, he took his lover into his arms and hugged him close before giving the vet a long kiss.

Duo returned the kiss and hug before sitting down in the chair and taking a sip of the coffee. "Consults were fine, nothing too hard. Mostly vaccinations, one abscess clean, a grass seed removal, a couple of nail clippings, oh, and a ferret that needed stitching. Mmm, something smells good."

"Shepherd’s pie, should be ready in fifteen minutes. A ferret that needed stitching? What the hell happened there?" Heero picked his own mug up and sat opposite his boyfriend.

"Tried to get into the daughter's pet rabbit's cage, didn’t quite make it though. He got caught up in the wire and so the rabbit, seeing his chance to get his own back on a ferret for rabbits everywhere, attacked. Left a gash about two centimeters long on the ferret's shoulder."

"Ah." Heero smiled to himself. He could honestly say that Duo's life as a vet was never boring. "Hungry?"

Duo's stomach chose that moment to announce its hollowness with a loud gurgle.

"I'll take that as a yes," Heero chuckled. "Go wash up and I'll dish it up."

Giving his lover a soft smile, Duo went to the bathroom and washed up, returning a few minutes later to set the table while Heero piled the meat, vegetables and mashed potatoes that made up the
shepherd’s pie onto their plates.

Silence abounded for a few minutes as each man dug into the food before Duo spoke. "How was your visit to the Peacecraft stud?"

Heero finished chewing his mouthful and swallowed before replying. "Good."

"Good?" Duo raised an eyebrow. "Come on, Heero. Spill." Duo had an uneasy feeling in his stomach and lowered his fork for a moment as he waited for Heero to tell him what had happened.

Heero wiped his mouth on his napkin and thought for a moment before beginning his tale. "Stables are beautifully set up, the sort of property I've always dreamed of having, but will never own. Ah, don't take that the wrong way, Duo. The set up you have here is great too."

"No offense taken, Heero." Duo gave a soft smile of reassurance.

"The horses are lovely too. She has some fantastic stallions and the brood mares are good stock."

"She?"

"Relena."

"Relena?" Duo's eyes darkened a little.

"Relena Peacecraft. She's the woman that owns and runs the stud."

"Ah." The gnawing feeling in Duo's gut intensified a notch.

Heero continued on, telling Duo about the stallions and the youngsters as well as Treize's intention to jump Peacemillion. He avoided talking about Relena for the moment, he knew he would have to tell Duo about her, he just didn't know how.

Sensing there was something there that Heero wasn't telling him, Duo waited patiently until the dark haired rider had finished chatting about the horses. "Sounds like Treize has ambitions for this new stallion."

"Yeah. He thinks if he can get him out to a few shows and place with him then his value will go up and Relena can stand him at public stud as well to recoup some of the money she spent on buying him and importing him."

"Wouldn't have been cheap," Duo replied.

"I wouldn't even hazard a guess as to how much he would have cost," Heero said.

"Heero?"

"Yes?"

"What aren't you telling me?"

Heero sighed and placed his fork on his plate, his appetite gone for the moment. He looked up into his lover's questioning eyes and decided that the straight forward approach was probably best. "Relena. When Treize introduced us she seemed to have her eyes all over me, as if I was some stud she wanted in her stable."

Duo felt the surge of jealousy hit him like a tidal wave.
"She was making passes at me all the time we were there. I didn't return her interest, of course. You're the only one I'm interested in, but I couldn't do much about it." Heero lowered his eyes, the misery plain on his face.

"Oh, Heero." Duo got up and walked around the table to where Heero was sitting and pulled the chair and Heero out a bit so he could sit in his lover's lap. Winding his arms around Heero's neck, he was pleased when Heero's arms encircled his waist.

"I trust you, Heero. I know you're not interested in girls and I realize you can't exactly come out and tell her you're gay either. I won't say I'm happy that she seems to have designs on my boyfriend, but I can cope with it. Sure I'm jealous, but I have to admit, she has good taste." Duo added a chuckle to try and lighten the mood a little.

"I don't know what to do to discourage her," Heero stated as he rested his head against Duo's shoulder.

"Simply tell her you have someone already. You don't have to say I'm male, just leave it open."

"I wish it were that simple."

"Huh?" Duo pulled back a little, clearly not understanding.

"She asked me if I was married or had a girlfriend and where I lived. I told her I wasn't married, didn't have a girlfriend and that I shared a house with you. I didn't realize at the time that she was fishing for information and had her sights set on me, otherwise I wouldn't have said anything about the girlfriend bit, I'd have said I was involved with someone."

"Ah. That does complicate things a little."

"Don't I know it."

"Don't worry about it too much, Heero. It's not as if you're going to be spending much time at her stud anyway. You're flat out at Treize's with the horses there, not to mention Zero and Shini here. I don't think it's going to be a problem. You'll probably only see her a couple of times every six months."

Duo did have a point, Heero thought. All he could do was hope that on the odd occasion he was to cross Relena's path she would get the message that he wasn't interested and eventually leave him alone.

"It's a shame I can't just tell her to shove off," Heero muttered. "Unfortunately she's important to Treize and his stable so I have to be polite for his sake." Heero didn't tell Duo about the woman's comments regarding Duo's expertise as a vet, Duo was already miffed enough that Relena was chasing him, no point in adding more fuel to the fire.

"Not easy, is it, Heero?" Duo grinned. "Never mind, I'm sure you will manage to be polite and still get the message across without endangering Treize's stable either. Love you, and thanks for telling me." Duo found Heero's lips and gave his boyfriend a stunning kiss.

"Love you too, Duo." Heero returned the kiss. "I think we'd better finish dinner now, it's already going cold."

"I'll just give it to Martha to zap."

"Martha?" What the hell was Duo going on about now?
"The microwave."

Heero shook his head. "I should have guessed."

* * *

Things began to settle down again over the next few weeks, Treize kept his word and managed to go to Relena's stud and work Peacemillion two to four times a week. On the other days, Walker or one of the grooms exercised the stallion. Taurus was starting to improve at last and would now complete a small course without refusals or getting hot headed. Both Heero and Treize hoped he would be okay for the next season of shows.

Sandrock continued to perform well and consistently. Heero took him steady and didn't put any undue pressure on the horse. Sandy responded well, his jumping abilities developing at a steady rate and he had now graduated to B grade level of competition. Goose was shaping up well, jumping as good as ever and a definite contender for the Nations Cup team.

Zero was his usual, calm self, only showing his excitement at shows but remaining reliable. He was jumping magnificently, rarely having a rail down and most times fighting it out with Treize and Goose for first place. Heero was pleased with the gray, Zero having started to hit his peak as the main part of the season was getting underway.

Little Shini was growing in leaps and bounds, now standing an impressive sixteen hands. Heero had continued to work with the colt in his spare time and Shini would now lunge on either rein with ease. He would also wear a saddle but Heero had yet to mouth him and long rein the colt [1]. Heero decided to leave that part of Shini's education until the end of the show season when he would have more time.

Relena had shown up at Treize's stable a few times. She'd been disappointed when Heero hadn't fronted at the stud to ride Peacemillion, and a little peeved. So, she decided if Heero wouldn't come to her, she would go to Heero. She usually managed to turn up once a week, mostly when Heero was just finishing off a session with one of the horses.

Being as influential and important to Treize's stable as she was, Heero resisted the urge to tell the woman to get lost and politely put up with her, although his teeth were permanently on edge and he wondered if the muscles on his hands and fingers would be permanently damaged from the way he was continuously clenching his fists.

Duo had managed to keep his jealousy at bay, trying to soothe and support Heero when his lover came home after one of Relena's visits. It wasn't easy as Heero felt he was betraying Duo when he wasn't. Duo did his best to reassure Heero that he trusted him, but not having witnessed how persistent the woman could be, he really couldn't help Heero all that much with ways to avoid the woman.

He did get his chance to meet Relena though and things didn't go down too well.

With Peacemillion getting fitter by the day, Treize had entered him in the open jumping at a large show in the neighboring shire. Goose and Zero had already been entered earlier in the season as this was one of the shows the selectors would be attending. With two of the four shows the selectors would be at having been and gone, it was important that Goose and Zero made a good showing at this one if they were to be short listed. Heero was quietly confident that Zero would make the list, his jumping of late had been perfect.

With Treize having entered Peacemillion, Relena naturally wanted to attend the show and see how
the horse went. Treize couldn't really refuse and had alerted Heero as soon as he'd found out. Heero wasn't too happy but he figured he could always ride off somewhere on Zero if the woman got too much. Once Heero told Duo, the vet had immediately asked Hilde to work the Sunday for him so he could attend as Heero's groom and see just what it was with this woman and her infatuation with his boyfriend.

Seeing the green eyed monster raising its ugly head, Hilde had agreed to swap shifts and demanded Duo tell her all about the day as soon as he got back. Duo had agreed and the pair had spent their coffee break with Catherine discussing all sorts of ways they could 'persuade' this Relena character to leave Heero alone; or as Hilde so eloquently put it; 'paws off, piss off, mine!' When Hilde began to demand ring side seats to see Duo deck the chick, Duo thought it best to change the conversation track.

Duo wasn't really sure what to expect from this woman so decided to play it by ear. He knew she was very influential and held a position of authority within the local area, that much he'd found out during his digging for information. He'd subtly asked questions about her, quizzed clients about their knowledge of the woman and found out quite a bit. Recon was always a good thing. When Heero had found out, he'd shaken his head.

Duo had told him he'd simply been information gathering. If he was going into battle for Heero then he needed to know what he was up against.

Heero had laughed, finding Duo's antics amusing.

Duo had grinned. "Know thy enemy," he'd told Heero and then proceeded to have a mock sword fight with his partner in the kitchen. Heero had to admit, Duo wielded a mean wooden spoon.

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The morning of the show dawned, Heero and Duo both in the stables early to get the horses fed and stable chores done before leaving. The jumping didn't start until ten and Heero's class would be on around twelve so they had plenty of time. The weather was looking a bit iffy, dark clouds floating around but no rain as yet. The forecast had said an overcast day with the chance of a shower, but as yet the clouds were only threatening. Heero didn't mind if it rained a little, it would take the sting out of the ground. If it rained too much though the opposite would happen, the ground would be very soft and the horses would have to put in extra effort to jump and clear the fences.

With Zero loaded up, Duo double checking the gear and slipping a few extra carrots into his pocket for his 'charge', Heero got in the car and started it up. Soon they were on the road to the show, CD blasting out what had become Heero's 'jumping' song. Duo's thoughts were drifting towards Relena, questions flitting through his mind. Despite Heero's reassurances that he wasn't interested in Relena, or girls, Duo couldn't help the small knot of fear. He was worried he would lose Heero. He didn't have half as much to offer Heero as an incentive to stay with him as Relena did. She had the large estate, successful stud, great horses and the ability to give Heero an heir.

Duo was a struggling country vet with a mortgage up to his armpits, vacuum cleaner that attacked with the cord and a computer that ate everything. Plus he was male and so the possibility of an heir was completely out of the question, unless there was divine intervention, something along the lines of him being impregnated like the Virgin Mary had been with Christ. Although if that were to happen he'd be dragged off to some lab somewhere and turned into a specimen and that wasn't appealing at all.

"What are you thinking about?"
"Uh?" Duo turned his head to look at his lover, realizing Heero had asked him a question.

"I said, what are you thinking about?"

"Ah. Trust me, you don't want to know."

"If you say so."

Studying his boyfriend's profile, Duo gave a smile. Relena could keep her hands off. Duo wasn't about to let his lover go without a fight.

Pulling into the show ground, Heero began to look around for Treize's trailer. They eventually spotted it, parked over the far side of the grounds. Heero drove across the grass and pulled up alongside. The grounds were large and had stables as well. Zero had been booked into one so they needed to find the secretary's office and get their stable allocation number as well as Heero's competitor number. Heero left Duo with the car and float while he went in search of the office. Treize's trailer was locked up so they assumed the man had already found his horses' accommodation.

Heero wasn't long, returning within fifteen minutes with all the necessary information. They unloaded Zero and grabbed as much as they could carry for the moment from the car. Zero's stable was two up from where Treize was and as soon as the other man saw them approaching, he came over to help. Once Zero was safely stabled, Duo went to fill the water bucket while Otto returned to the float and car with Heero to bring the remainder of the gear down.

Duo hadn't spotted any female around the horses so assumed that Relena had yet to show up. Deciding to ignore the upcoming meeting, Duo busied himself with Zero, hanging up the gray's haynet and removing the floating boots. A locker had been provided with the stable and Heero had put his gear in there, Duo dumped the boots in and fetched the grooming kit. He was nervous and the best way to combat his nervousness was to keep busy.

Zero was oblivious to it all. He knew the sights, sounds and smells of shows by now and settled into the strange stable really well. He took a sniff around, found his water bucket and lipped playfully at the water before taking a drink. Standing with his attention focused on a pretty chestnut mare a few stables down, he let the water dribble out from between his lips. The mare showed no interest so Zero ducked his head back inside the stable and located his haynet.

The nice human came in and removed his rug then began to brush his coat. Zero pulled at the haynet and rested a hind leg, the firm strokes of the brush over his body felt good, removing the dirt and dust and massaging his muscles. Once the brushing was finished, the nice human gave him a carrot and stroked his ears.

With Zero brushed and settled, Duo exited the stable and returned the grooming tools to the locker. Heero was chatting with Treize and Duo wandered over.

"Doctor Maxwell. How are you?" Treize asked and extended his hand.

Duo shook the offered hand. "I'm well, Mr Khushrenada, and please, call me Duo."

"Then you must call me Treize. How do you think Heero will do today?"

"Zero's in fine form so depending on the course I think Heero has an excellent chance. I hear you're jumping this new stallion today?"

"That's right. Peacemillion is over here. Would you care to take a look at him?"
Duo nodded and Treize led the way. Heero walked beside his boyfriend, bumping their shoulders together every now and then. Arriving at the stable, Duo looked at the stallion inside. He gave a low whistle.

"Nice horse," Duo said as he ran an eye over the animal. He wasn't an expert by any means, but he knew enough to recognize a quality animal when he saw it. Heero had also educated him further on the equine species so Duo knew a little more about horses than he had a couple of years ago. "How do you think he will go?"

"Not sure. This will be his first competition here so it's anyone's guess as to how he will perform. He's been doing well in training so I'll be happy if he goes clear and makes it into the jump off. I don't hold any illusions of him placing, just as long as he goes well and does what's asked of him then I'll be happy."

Duo thought that was a pretty good attitude to have, but didn't voice his thoughts. His eyes turned to the stable next to Peacemillion where Goose was resting quietly. "I see you still have the mighty midget with you," he chuckled.

Treize rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Can't take Goose anywhere without Duck. At least he won't escape from the stable, providing his door is kept shut."

"I agree. I think he would have problems trying to jump out," Duo laughed as he watched the mini pony tugging away at the haynet.

"If he can jump out of there then maybe he should be in the ring competing," stated Treize dryly.

Duo watched the mini pony for a moment before his attention was drawn away by a shrill voice. He turned and leaned against the stable door as he watched the approaching person.

"Treize, Heero," the woman said in a high tone as she walked up.

"Relena," responded Treize. Heero turned away and gave Duo a long suffering look.

This must be the infamous Relena, horseflesh expert and boyfriend nabber, Duo thought and shuddered. No wonder Heero cringed, that voice was enough to ruin a dog's hearing. He broke out in a cold sweat, knowing he had no choice but to face the demon. Giving himself a mental shake, Duo squared his shoulders. He had no reason to fear this woman, no reason for her to make him nervous. Heero was his, his dammit! No way was he going to let this woman get her grubby little paws on his lover.

Duo watched as Relena greeted Treize and then turned her attention to Heero. The way her eyes lit up, the seductive purr she put into her voice when speaking to Heero and the hand she went to rest on his arm all infuriated Duo. Shoving off the stable door, Duo raised himself to his full height and stepped forwards, pushing himself between Heero and Relena, effectively cutting off her hand's intention.

"You must be Relena Peacecraft," Duo said, his voice a little strong.

Relena was annoyed that her attempt to hold Heero's arm had been intercepted and she turned her attention from her 'stud' to the reason for the annoyance. "Yes, I am Relena Peacecraft. Who might you be?" Her tone was condescending and her eyes raked over the slender form before her. She noted the long hair and unusual eyes.

"I'm Doctor Duo Maxwell. Heero's house mate and assistant at shows," Duo stated calmly and offered his hand as a polite gesture.
Relena sniffed and looked at the hand in distaste. "Ah. You're the cat vet," she stated and then with a dismissive look, turned her attention back to Heero.

Duo lowered his hand, his eyes narrowed and it was all he could do not to growl at the woman. *Cat vet indeed!* He knew when he was being ignored and for the moment he let it slide, opting to watch what the woman was up to and how she tried to flirt with his boyfriend.

Treize watched from the side. He didn't try to interfere, knowing this was something that Heero and Duo had to work out themselves. His heart bled though for the vet when he heard Relena's snub. Seeing the expression of thunder on Duo's face, Treize knew the vet wasn't about to sit back and take this lying down. No, Treize had a feeling that Duo would be more than capable of taking care of one Miss Relena Peacecraft.

Especially when the prize was Heero.

Looked like there was going to be quite a cat fight.

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*tbc...*

[1] Mouthing and Long reining: This is where a youngster is fitted with a bit for the first time. It usually has 'keys' in the middle so the youngster can play with the metal with its tongue and get used to having something in its mouth. Long reining is where a pair of extra long reins are attached to the bit and the handler walks behind the horse, teaching it to stop, start and turn. Any questions, email me and I'll be happy to answer them.
Chapter 17

"Are you riding today?" Relena asked Heero as she tried to edge a little closer.

"Yes."


Heero managed to move away a little, not as much as he would have liked though. Out the corner of his eye he could see Duo, the vet's face was impassive but Heero could see the anger in the tensing of Duo's jaw and the way his violet eyes were sparking. "Zero is down here," Heero ground out and spun around.

Relena was quick off the mark and grabbed Heero's arm, latching on as the dark haired rider strode towards Zero's stable. Duo managed to suppress the urge to pick Relena up and dump her in the manure heap, but he wasn't happy at all.

"Don't let her get to you."

Duo spun around to see Treize standing beside him, a frown on his handsome features. "I've never met such a low down, conniving, condescending cow in all my life," Duo growled as his eyes blazed. "How dare she put her paws on my boyfriend!" he hissed.

Treize began to chuckle and Duo gave him a low look. "Sorry. I'm not laughing at you or the situation." He took a breath and composed himself. "I'm merely finding your choice of words - interesting."

Duo thought quickly about what he'd said and then gave a chuckle of his own. "I guess they were a bit weird and come to think of it, and I really shouldn't be insulting cows. Most of the cows I've dealt with are soft creatures."

At that, Treize let out a hearty laugh. "Want a bit of advice from an old timer?"

"You're not that old, Treize!"

"Thank you."

"Welcome."

"As I was saying, would you like a little advice?"

"Don't mind if I do. It seems the Maxwell charm isn't working."

"Relena has always pretty much gotten what she wants. She can be a persistent person and continuously pushing to the point of obsession," began Treize.

"Like the tape worms we get in dogs and cats?"

"I'd never thought of Relena as a parasite."

"If you ask me she's the perfect example. She's stuck to Heero like a leech. God, what I wouldn't give for a bag of salt."
Trying hard not to let his laughter escape, Treize continued. "As I was saying, Duo. Relena is pretty much your average spoiled rich kid. Her parents doted on her and she learnt quickly how to manipulate them to get what she wanted. She's pretty shrewd and will use all her powers to have what she thinks she should. In this case, Heero. My advice to you is to ignore her antics, treat her the same way she treats you. Heero isn't interested in her at all. Trust him, Duo, he won't betray you."

Duo chewed over Treize's words for a moment. "But what about you, Treize? If I go out of my way to upset the parasite, won't she stop sending you horses or something?"

"Don't worry about me, Duo. Relena knows she can't do without me. If I don't break the horses in, school them and show them then her stud isn't going to be half as successful as it currently is. She needs me just as much as I need her horses. We came to an understanding ages ago."

With those words, Duo's face lit up. "Then it's open season on parasites?" he asked with a cheeky grin.

"I'd like to think it was war against parasites."

"Treize, if I wasn't already involved I'd kiss you."

"No offense, Doctor Maxwell, but I don't think I fancy being trampled into the ground by a jealous Heero."

Duo laughed. "No offense taken. Now, I'm off to annoy the hell out of a parasite." Duo turned and began to make his way down to Zero's stable where he could clearly see Heero getting desperate. Walking right up to the pair, Duo pushed his way in and stated in a clear tone that brooked no argument. "Heero, you haven't got time to waste showing Miss Peecraft your horse, you need to get saddled up and warm Zero up."

"It's Peacecraft," Relena snapped haughtily.

Heero did his best not to snicker. "Ah, yeah. You're right, Duo. I should go get his gear and start warming up."

"I can give you a hand," Relena said quickly, batting her eyelashes at Heero.

Before Heero had a chance to answer, Duo got in first. "That's very kind of you, Miss Piecrust. Zero's water bucket needs refilling if you don't mind. Tap is down that way." Duo presented the woman with an almost empty water bucket.

Relena eyed the bucket and wrinkled her nose in disgust. "I do not fill and cart water buckets. And my name is Peacecraft!"

"You offered to help though, did you not, Miss Pizzacroft?" Duo was in his element. He wasn't normally a vindictive person but this woman had instantly raised his hackles with her insults to his standing as a vet and now his claws were out and all bets were off.

"I was letting Heero know I would help him, not you," the woman hissed, the venom was clear in her voice. "And for the last time my name is Peacecraft; P. e. a. c. e. c. r. a. f. t.!

"Yeah, fine, sure, whatever. Look, if you're not gonna help by filling up Zero's water bucket would you mind getting the hell out of the way so I can get the horse ready, Miss Peaceofcrap?"

Heero took one look at Relena's red face and took off as fast as he could down the stable block. He knew if he lost it there he would surely never ride again. Once clear of the stables he managed to find
a spot and give in to his laughter. He had to hand it to his partner, Duo could certainly be a snarky bugger when he wanted to. It didn't pay to piss him off. Relena did deserve all she got from Duo though. The woman had no right to speak to the vet in such a manner, belittling him when she didn't even know him.

Having recovered enough to return, Heero did a detour via the lockers to collect Zero's gear. He was surprised to see Zero's saddle, bridle and jumping boots gone. Duo must have already fetched them, he figured. Grabbing his helmet and whip, Heero locked the small padlock and headed back to the stable, wondering what was going to greet him. Hopefully Duo had left the sharp and pointy tools of his trade back at the surgery. When Heero approached the stable, he couldn't see Relena and gave a sigh of relief. He walked up and stuck his head over the door. Inside, Duo was fastening the last buckle on Zero's jumping boots.

"Coast clear?" he asked.

Duo straightened up and gave his lover a grin. "For the moment. I was wondering where you'd shot off too and if you were going to return."

"Sorry about deserting you like that, but I had to get away before I did something I would regret."

"Heero? I'm sorry if I went a little overboard."

"Don't worry about it, Duo. I think she deserved everything she got. Where the hell did you manage to come up with all those distortions of her name?"

Leading Zero out of the stable, Duo gave a soft laugh. "You're talking to the master of names here, Heero."

Heero had to agree. Duo did have an uncanny knack of finding names for things, didn't Nrobbuts, Fido, Gertrude, Harriet, Daisy, Jaws and Martha stand in testimony to that? With a shake of his head, Heero took the reins from Duo and led the stallion out of the stable block to the warm up area, hoping that he could avoid Relena for a while longer.

"Where is she anyway?" Heero asked as he tightened his girth and prepared to mount.

"She disappeared a second or two after you did, muttering something about getting a drink and seeking advice on slander. I don't think she likes me much."

"I wonder why," laughed Heero as he settled into his saddle. "Thanks, Duo. She does get annoying after a while."

"No one stalks my boyfriend and gets away with it," growled Duo. "Now, go get Zero warmed up, they will be calling you soon to walk the course."

Heero rode off and began to warm Zero up. Treize and Otto joined him a few minutes later on Peacemillion and Goose respectively. Relena also returned but she stood on the opposite side of the warm up arena to where Duo was standing. Duo couldn't care less, the further the pink parasite stayed away from him and his Heero, the better. Idly Duo wondered what Heero would think of the name he'd given Relena. She did stand out from the crowd in her bright pink sundress. It made Duo nauseous and hurt his eyes to look at her. He returned his attention to Zero and the way the horse was traveling today. Zero seemed fresh and eager, that was a good thing. Duo hoped that the gray would do them proud today, especially with the selectors in attendance. He continued to watch as Heero put the stallion over a few practice jumps and then walked him around to cool off.

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The course had been open for walking, Treize and Heero walking it together and agreeing that it wasn't too difficult. The arena space wasn't that big and the course designer had built the course utilizing every inch of the available space. It was a rider's course, one that would require utmost obedience from the horse and steady riding by the rider. There wouldn't be much in the way of speed, there wasn't enough room. Heero held no illusions that the jump off would come down to a test of skill from the rider and education of the horse.

Relena was still there, avoiding Duo as much as possible but sticking as close to Heero as she could. Duo was tempted several times to tell her to 'fuck off' Heero was his, but knowing the woman's influence and social standing, he knew she would waste no time in seeing that their relationship was made public, something that would severely damage the both of them and Duo wanted to avoid that at all costs. All he could do was try to put himself between Heero and Relena as much as possible without revealing the true nature of their relationship, but it wasn't easy.

Treize sympathized with the young vet and also tried to keep Relena away from Heero, getting her a little more involved with Peacemillion. The open jumping class started and the group managed to watch a few riders go through before rewarming their horses. Goose was the first of their horses to jump, Zero fourth after Goose and Peacemillion was second last. As Treize prepared to enter the ring on Goose, everyone wished him good luck and then got themselves into position to watch.

It was a pleasure to watch Treize and his horse as they negotiated the course. The sheer skill of the man showed through as he rode carefully around the jumps. Goose was calm and collected, shortening and lengthening his stride as his rider asked. Approaching the final fence, a spread triple, it seemed as if everyone was holding their breath. Goose came at the first element, cleared it, landed and took two strides before propelling himself into the air over the second element. He cleared that as well, took another two strides and launched into the air for the final element. The sound of hooves biting into the turf signaled that Goose had cleared the jump, the announcer confirming that Tall Geese and Treize Khushrenada had gone clear.

They all gathered around Treize to congratulate him as he came out of the ring. So far his was the only clear round, something Heero was determined to rectify. The next competitor went and came out with four faults, the following one went clear and then the next was eliminated when the horse decided it didn't like the look of the gate and dumped his rider into it. Then it was Heero's turn.

Duo fiddled with the end of his braid as he watched his boyfriend enter the arena, salute the judge and then begin his course. He had no doubt that Zero could and would clear everything, but there was always that unknown element when dealing with a living, breathing creature.

It was the first time that Relena had watched Heero in competition. She'd seen him ride in the paddock at Treize's but to actually witness him in action at a show was something else entirely.

"He's improving all the time," Duo remarked to Treize who was standing beside him.

"He's a remarkable young man with a lot of potential," replied Treize.

"He does know how to sit a horse," Relena said from her position a few feet away on Treize's other side.

Duo scowled but kept his mouth shut. He had to be careful, he didn't want to give Relena any hint as to his and Heero's true relationship, but he wasn't going to let her fawn all over Heero either.

In the ring, Heero was concentrating hard. Keeping his horse together, adjusting the stride as the course warranted and doing his best to give Zero every opportunity to clear the fences.
Zero was enjoying himself. The jumps weren't all that high or difficult, he just had to listen to his
master and react according to his requests. Fence after fence appeared and was cleared, all in Zero's
effortless style. Zero cleared the wall with a whisk of his tail and bore down on the final element, the
spread triple.

Closing his fingers on the reins, Heero shortened Zero's stride a fraction, bringing the energy back to
concentrate in Zero's hindquarters. Three strides away, Heero gave Zero his head and applied his leg,
the gray responding by bounding forward and clearing the first element. As they landed, Heero took
up the contact, rode his horse together and had him beautifully positioned for the second element.
That was also cleared with minimal effort and now only the third of the fences remained.

Zero gathered himself together, hindquarters coming underneath his body and propelling him into the
air. His little ears were pricked and the love of jumping shone in his eyes. Poles passed beneath
Zero's belly and then the forelegs came out, reaching for the ground and cutting deep into the turf as
they bore the brunt of the horse’s weight.

The finish flags flashed past and Heero allowed himself a grin. He patted the sweaty neck as he
brought Zero back to a trot and looked for the exit.

"Clear round," blared the loudspeaker.

"Good boy," Heero enthused as he stroked a hand along the muscular neck.

Zero tossed his head as if to say 'I know I'm good, now where's the carrots?'

"Great round, Heero!" Duo grinned and congratulated as Zero came out the ring.

"Well ridden," praised Treize.

"That was marvelous," came Relena's voice as she pushed her way forth and rested a hand on
Heero's knee.

"Thank you, but it isn't over yet," replied Heero as he tried to shift his knee. Somehow he managed
to nudge Zero in the ribs and the horse gave a soft snort before moving forwards, almost knocking
Duo over but removing Relena's hand from Heero's knee.

"Geeze, take it easy, buddy," Duo scolded as he dodged out the way.

Zero turned his gray face to the nice human and wuffled in apology.

"Sorry, Duo," Heero muttered and then went to dismount. Swinging his leg over Zero's back, Heero
didn't realize how close Relena was standing and he almost knocked the woman's hat off her head
with his foot. "Ah, sorry, Relena."

"It's quite all right," Relena replied as she straightened her hat and seeing her chance, moved to stand
beside Heero as he loosened the horses girth and ran his stirrups up.

Duo was busy feeding Zero carrots and petting the stallion, the horse wolfing down his favorite treat.
He didn't miss Relena's movement though. Duo felt his hackles rise again, but there wasn't anything
he could do about the situation as they were in the collecting ring and surrounded by a lot of horses
and riders. Reaching into his pocket for another carrot, Duo consoled himself by stroking Zero's ears
and muttering his woes to the horse.

"How long before Peacemillion jumps?" Heero asked in an attempt to take the attention away from
himself.
"I'd say about half an hour," replied Treize.

Turning back, Heero looked at Duo. "I need to take a short walk."

"I'll come with you," Duo replied, getting a drift of what Heero wasn't saying. "Otto, would you mind hanging onto Zero for a few minutes?"

"No problem." Otto stepped over and took the gray's reins.

"Thanks. Won't be long," smiled Duo and went to walk beside Heero. Unfortunately, Relena decided she wanted to stretch her legs as well and joined them. Duo did his best to keep the scowl from his face.

"How do you think you will go in the jump off, Heero?" Relena asked as she tried to make polite conversation.

Heero shrugged his shoulders. "Hard to say. Nothing’s a certainty."

"But you rode so well. Surely you will place in the top three?"

"It depends on a lot of things," Heero said and continued to walk, a little faster though.

"Well, I think you will win." The woman gave a beaming smile, ran her hand down Heero's arm and then hooked her hand around Heero's elbow.

Heero did his best not to flinch. Duo growled but managed to turn it into a cough. He was not happy. They walked for a few more moments, came to a small building and Heero stepped up the small concrete step, Relena still hanging onto his arm.

"Um," Heero began but was saved when Duo interrupted him.

"I think you should let go now," he said coolly.

Relena turned her scornful gaze to Duo, looking him up and down as if he had crawled out from underneath a rock.

"I don't think you want to go in there, Miss Peachydraft."

Relena was about to give the uncouth vet a piece of her mind when she noticed where they were standing. Above the door in front of her, the words 'Gents' stood out in bold letters. Her cheeks colored a little and she reluctantly let go of Heero's arm. "Ah. I'll wait out here then."

"You do that," muttered Duo and quickly entered the gents, Heero right behind him. Once inside and safe from prying eyes, Duo swept Heero into his arms and kissed him senseless. "I've been wanting to do that all morning," he whispered and nuzzled Heero's neck.

Heero hung on to Duo, feeling safe in his boyfriend's arms. "I'm sorry, Duo. I don't know why she doesn't get the message."

"Hush, Heero. It's not your fault. I trust you, I know you're not encouraging her. I wish there was more I could do to stop her hassling you."

"Personally I think you're doing quite well," Heero smirked. "Peachydraft?"

"I prefer Peaceofcrap myself," Duo sniggered.
It was all Heero could do not to laugh out loud.

"You know, I really don't like making fun of her name, I bet she's an okay person normally."

"Duo, I know it's not in your nature to be like this towards anyone, but after the way she's run you and your vet skills down, I really don't blame you. In fact I think you're showing remarkable restraint by keeping it at simply mangling her name."

"It's not easy, Heero. Dumping her in the shit heap is what I'd really like to do."

Heero chuckled softly. "Kiss me again before we have to head back. I've got a jump off to ride."

Duo willingly kissed his lover, a bruising kiss filled with desperation and longing. Slightly dazzled, Heero managed to regain some form of composure before exiting the toilets.

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They made it back to the collecting ring with two horses to go before Treize would jump Peacemillion. So far there were a total of five clears, including Goose and Zero. Duo took Zero from Otto, thanking the groom and then getting himself and Zero into a position so that they could watch Treize. The former silver medalist rode the big gray around, loosening the muscles and getting a feel for how the horse was reacting to the crowds and the competition. Peacemillion felt calm and responsive, and Treize felt his confidence grow a touch.

A large bay left the arena with eight faults and then it was Treize's turn. He rode into the arena, saluted the judge and began to canter his circle, waiting for the bell to signal that he could start. The bell rang, Treize turned the horse and cantered through the start flags.

Relena moved a little closer to Heero, her hand resting on his forearm as she watched her horse compete. Relena had never been one to ride, her father having only bred racehorses which she wasn't allowed to ride because of their value. When she'd inherited the stud and gone into her own line of breeding she didn't have the time to learn how. It hadn't bothered her, she had Treize to do all the work from the animal's back. Unfortunately though, her lack of knowledge on the riding side of things meant she didn't fully appreciate the skills Treize and some of the other riders were showing. It also meant she was lost in some parts of the conversations that were going on around her; and that annoyed her.

Well, her lack of ridden knowledge didn't annoy her, it was more that the uncouth vet seemed to know exactly what was going on and he didn't compete either.

"Going well so far," Heero said as his eyes tracked the horse and rider in the ring.

"He will need to steady back a bit for the gate, if he doesn't the stride will be wrong," commented Duo.

"I'm sure that Treize knows what he's doing," Relena said in a cold tone.

Duo raised an eyebrow, Heero shrugged one shoulder. Duo mouthed 'touchy', Heero gave a small nod.

"He's over the gate," Otto said, breaking the silent communication between the guys.

Peacemillion was traveling well, his long stride was eating up the ground, but Treize had to concentrate and ride hard to keep the horse together. While the long stride was an advantage in some cases, on a course such as this it could be a hindrance. Treize had to use all his skills to keep the
stallion focused, constantly shortening and lengthening the stride as the course dictated.

Parallel bars followed the gate, then it was a left turn for the run into the double followed by off set rails on the curve. Peacemillion cleared them all with ease. The wall appeared and was successfully negotiated. All that remained was the spread triple.

Sitting down deep into his saddle, Treize used his seat to collect the stallion together. Hands held the reins softly but firmly, keeping the horse in check while legs and seat drove the hindquarters under the body, effectively turning the stallion into a coiled spring. Three strides away, Treize let the horse go, driving him forwards whilst maintaining a steady contact with the animal's mouth.

Peacemillion grunted as he jumped the first element, he landed, gathered himself together and soared over the second. His striding was slightly out as he approached the third element and he took off awkwardly. Peacemillion gave a twist of his hindquarters, Treize following the movement and allowing the reins to slip through his fingers so as not to check the horse in the mouth. The hind legs just brushed the top pole as Peacemillion came back to earth. The pole wobbled, rolled in the cups for a moment before settling back into place.

"Shit, that was lucky!" stated Duo as he watched the pole return to its position and not hit the dirt.

"I'll say." Heero took a deep breath and let the air out in a long sigh.

Treize exited the ring and rode over, his face smiling broadly as he patted the horse. "He did well, didn't he?"

"Excellent round, boss," Otto said. He took the horse's reins from Treize as the man dismounted.

"That was lovely," Relena remarked and patted her horse's neck.

"He's certainly got a jump on him," Treize said and patted the horse's rump.

"You were lucky with that last jump," Duo said with a smile.

"Don't I know it! I'm not sure what happened there, he came in a half a stride out."

"It's not an easy course to ride on a horse that has such a long stride," Heero commented.

"By my calculations there are six of you in the jump off," said Duo. "The last rider is going now but I don't think they will go clear."

All eyes returned to the ring where a chestnut horse was having difficulty. The rider hadn't paid any attention to the striding when walking the course and was now attempting to ride the course at a fast pace, something that wasn't a good idea. Sure enough, they came to grief at the double, poles and jump wings going in all directions. The rider picked themselves up, obviously unhurt and looked around for their horse. The chestnut trotted around, head up, nostrils snorting as it looked for the exit, broken reins trailing behind. A steward tried to catch the horse but the chestnut wasn't having any of it. With a toss of its head, it broke into a gallop and charged around the arena.

The horse spotted the collecting ring where all the other horses were gathered and made a beeline for it. Horses, competitors and spectators alike all scattered as the chestnut came galloping through. Zero danced around, Duo doing his best to hang onto him. Otto had his hands full with Peacemillion while Treize was trying to calm Goose. Heero reacted out of instinct. Relena was right by his side and in the path of the oncoming horse, without thinking, Heero grabbed Relena by the arm and shoved her backwards out of harms way. The woman was caught off guard and stumbled with the sudden push. She lost her footing and fell.
The horse careered past, showering both Relena and Heero with dirt from its hooves as it shot through the collecting ring and disappeared in the direction of the stables. Once the dust settled, Heero turned to see if Zero and Duo were okay. Noting that his lover had a firm hold of the stallion and was soothing the excited horse, he turned to Relena.

"Shit!" Quickly, Heero moved forwards and extended a hand to pull Relena up from the ground. "Sorry about that. Are you okay?"

Relena accepted the help to lift herself up. She checked over her person, dusting herself off. "I think so."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push you over, I was just trying to get you out of the horse’s way."

Duo, having managed to calm Zero down, checked that Otto, Treize and their horses were also okay before turning his attention to Heero. A smile tugged at his mouth as he observed his boyfriend hauling Relena to her feet.

"Are you all right, Relena?" Treize asked as he approached the woman who was still dusting her clothes.

"Yes. I'm... agghhhh!"

"What?!" Heero and Treize both exclaimed together.

"My dress, it's ruined!" Relena was twisting her head around to see the damage. In the process of dusting herself off, her hands had connected with something damp. Now she wanted to know what it was and her face reddened with annoyance as she noted the large, brown stain on the back of her dress. On the grass where she'd fallen sat an innocent, but now flattened pile of manure.

Not the normal, small balls of dung but a large, sloppy pile, reminiscent of a cow pat.

Duo couldn't help the snicker and sidled up to his boyfriend. Unable to keep the glee from his voice, he whispered into Heero's ear. "I thought I was the one that wanted to drop her in the shit heap, Heero."

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 18

Treize took a grumbling Relena back to his horse truck where he usually kept a change of clothes. He knew they would be a little big on the woman but it was the best he could do given the circumstances.

Fortunately Duo had managed to hold onto his laughter until the woman was out of range, politely offering his condolences and appearing concerned that she'd ruined her dress. He did point out though that a ruined dress was much easier to fix than a trampled body.

Relena had looked down her nose at him and turned to Heero, accepting his apologies with teary eyes. She seemed a little put out though when Heero didn't offer to escort her back to the trailer with Treize.

Once the woman had gone, Duo let the laughter go with gusto. "Oh, Heero. I swear, I couldn't have done a better job myself."

Heero was looking a little stunned. He'd never meant to push her over, just get her out of harm's way. No matter how much he disliked her attentions he wouldn't go so far as to deliberately hurt her. He knew Duo wouldn't either and it seemed ironic that while Duo was the one to have voiced his wish to dump Relena in the manure heap, it had actually been him that had done it.

Otto was also chuckling away. While he was totally unaware of Duo and Heero's relationship, he wasn't blind either. He'd noticed how clingy the girl was and that Heero simply didn't return her interest. "I'd say that one was a classic," he said in-between chuckles.

"I wish I'd had my camera, that was priceless," Duo snickered, leaning against Zero for support as his legs threatened to buckle under him.

"I really didn't mean to do that," Heero defended himself.

"We know that," Otto said. "It might get her to leave you alone a bit though and allow you to concentrate on your riding."

"I hope so," muttered Heero.

The announcer came over the loud speakers, letting the competitors know that the course was being altered for the jump off and giving the order for the jump off.

Heero listened carefully. Goose was second in the jump off, Heero third and Peacemillion last. There were six of them in total. Heero hoped that Treize would hurry up and return, the course would be open for them to walk in a few minutes and Treize would need to walk it too.

Back at the trailer, Treize was rummaging around in the groom's compartment while Relena continued to bemoan her ruined dress. The girl's complaining was starting to grate on his nerves and he was coming close to telling her that maybe it would be better if she didn't attend any shows in the future. Only his impeccable manners stopped him from saying what he'd really like to. Sighing with relief, he yanked out a pair of jeans and smallish t-shirt.

"Here. This is the best I can do, Relena."
Relena looked at the clothes. "They're miles too big, Treize. I'll look like a groom walking around in those."

"It's either these, wear your soiled dress or go home and change," Treize replied. "I'm sorry, this is all I have."

"I guess it will have to do then," grumbled Relena and took the clothing.

"You can change in here. When you're done come back to the collecting ring."

"Aren't you going to wait for me?"

"Relena, I can't. I have to get back and walk the jump off course. They've already announced the jump off order and Goose is second to go. I need to walk the course so I know where to take the risks. The selectors are here and it's vital that Goose makes a good showing if I'm to have any chance of getting in the team." Treize was getting irritated now.

"Okay then, I guess you should go. I'll be over soon. Oh, I don't suppose you have a belt at all? These jeans are going to be too loose around my hips."

"No, I don't. There's some binder twine in the trailer though, just grab a length of that," replied Treize as he beat a hasty retreat. The announcer was calling for the competitors in the jump off to come and walk the course.

"I have to go, they're calling me." Treize managed to escape, leaving a still grumbling Relena to change.

Treize walked quickly across the grounds, he could see Heero scanning around for him from the collecting ring and he waved to let him know he was on his way.

"What took you so long and where's Relena?" Heero asked as Treize practically jogged up to him and grabbed his arm, steering them both to the arena and the waiting course.

"She's still changing; I couldn't find anything small enough to fit her."

"Oh."

"Forget about her, Heero. We need to concentrate on the course. Now, where's the first jump?"

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Duo kept a wary eye out for the pink parasite as Heero and Treize walked the course. He might dislike the woman but he wouldn't wish her any harm. Heero returned and took the reins from Duo, checking his girth and preparing to mount and loosen up the gray.

"What's the course like?" Duo asked as he stood beside Zero.

Heero adjusted his helmet and smiled down at his boyfriend. "Not as bad as it could have been. The first three fences are straightforward, after that it gets tricky. There's a sharp turn to the gate and then the wall and triple follow on. If your horse is balanced from the oxer to the gate then you can take an inner, shorter track to the wall, cutting inside the rustic rails. If he's not then you'll have to take the longer track, to the outside of the rails and that will take more time. I'd say it's going to be won or lost on that turn."

"Can Zero do it?"
"If I can keep him together he should."

"How does Treize rate his chances?"

"With Goose, he's pretty confident. Peacemillion though, that's going to be a completely different story. That horse has such a long stride, if Treize doesn't get him to shorten up enough then he's going to have to take the longer run." Heero leaned down and brushed his knuckles across Duo's cheek. "Love you," he whispered softly.

Duo smiled. "Good luck, Heero."

"Thanks."

"Oh my. Is that what I think it is?" Duo's eyes flitted over the crowd.


"Looks like we're gonna have to suffer with the presence of Miss 'Peace-de-resistance' a little longer."

"Not me," Heero stated. "I've got a horse to warm up and a jump off to do." Heero nudged his horse and Zero began to trot off.

"Traitor," Duo called after him, but his face held a grin.

Otto came across and stood beside Duo, holding Peacemillion as Treize loosened Goose up again. He'd also spotted Relena heading in their direction and while he respected the woman, he really didn't like having to deal with her. Usually Treize was the one she came to see and didn't bother much with the grooms. She would take a tour of the stables, see how the horses were coming along and that was pretty much it. She had started to show up a little more frequently of late, mostly when Heero was there and Otto found it a touch annoying. Relena didn't bother him and the stable routine, but Otto could see the woman's attentions annoyed and distracted Heero. Unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do about it.

Otto had spoken about his concerns to Treize, but like him, there wasn't much Treize could do about it either. Otto had to bite his tongue and carry on with his duties. After all, he was just a groom and it wasn't for him to say who could visit. Luckily for them though, this time Relena opted to stay a fair distance away.

Duo gave a soft snicker, Otto turned to look at him in askance. "She don't look so high and mighty now," Duo explained and nodded in Relena's direction.

Otto noted the jeans rolled up at the leg, a piece of binder twine wrapped through the belt loops to secure them. The large T-shirt didn't do much for her figure either.

"All she needs is the straw hat, piece of hay hanging out of the mouth and she'd be your typical country gal," Duo said in an amused tone.

"Don't forget the hoedown music," Otto added.

Duo snorted and tried to hold his laughter. The mood suddenly changed though as the first competitor in the jump off was called into the arena. Duo and Otto moved together to get a better view. Treize appeared and then Heero as the first rider entered the ring.

Duo could see what Heero meant when he'd stated that the course was tricky. This rider was having
a few problems getting his horse to listen to him and slow his gait. The horse was keen and eager, unfortunately speed was against him. Coming clear off the oxer, the horse was going too fast to make the tight, inside turn to the gate and had to take the longer run, costing valuable seconds. He cleared the rest of the course and came out with no faults and a time of 57.68 seconds.

Treize checked his girth and closing his fingers on the reins, rode into the ring amid calls of good luck from his friends. He found the judge, saluted and then with a determined look, rode towards the start flags. The bell rang and Treize turned Goose towards the start. "Take it easy, boy, and listen to me. This isn't hard but we have to go clear."

Goose twitched an ear and then focused on the jumps ahead, his attention fully on the job at hand.

The first fence, a cross bar, was cleared easily and then the parallel bars loomed ahead. Goose cleared them effortlessly, his ears pricked as he waited for the signals from his rider. He steadied himself as he approached the oxer, gathered his hind legs under him and jumped. As he landed Treize sat down hard in his saddle, taking a firm contact and riding the horse together, shortening the stride and asking for the turn. Goose responded immediately, sitting well on his haunches and making a spectacular turn within two strides of landing.

"Bastard!" hissed Heero as he watched, although there was a smile on his face.

"Wow! Go Treize," Duo said as he stood in awe of the man's skill.

Goose took another three strides and cleared the gate, every muscle stretching, listening to his rider. The wall appeared and was also cleared; now only the triple remained. Treize collected Goose together, picked the take off point and then rode the horse in. Goose lengthened out, jumped the first element, landed, took two strides and then launched over the second element. Clearing that, he took another three strides and leapt over the third. As Goose landed so Treize's legs were there, urging the horse on and Goose was only too eager to comply. He flattened his ears and sprang into a gallop, heading straight through the finish flags and breaking the beam of the electronic timer.

Treize steadied the bay, bringing the reluctant horse back to a trot and looking up at the numerical display. His face broke out into a wide grin as he turned for the exit.

"Clear round in a time of 48.39," the announcer stated over the loud speaker. "Next competitor, Heero Yuy on Zero."

As Treize rode out the ring, so Heero rode in. "Good luck," said Treize as they passed.

"You set a scorcher of a time, Treize," replied Heero. "Good round."

Duo and Otto wished Heero good luck as the accountant rode into the ring, then they congratulated Treize as he rode out. Treize turned Goose around so he could sit and watch Heero's round before changing over to Peacemillion and quickly warming that horse up. Duo found a carrot in his pocket and gave it to Goose who took it politely and crunched away.

Heero pushed his helmet on further, gripped his whip tightly and rode over to the judge. He saluted and headed for the start flags. Treize had certainly thrown down the gauntlet and Heero was determined to give him a run for his money. The bell rang and Heero ran a hand down Zero's neck.

"Tough one this time, Zero. You're really going to have to listen to me and give this all you have."

Zero's shoulder muscle quivered in response. Zero didn't understand what his master was saying, but he could tell from the tone of his voice and the touch to his neck that this was important. Feeling his master's legs close on his sides, Zero went smoothly into a canter.
Heero turned for the start and broke the beam of the electronic clock.

The cross bar and parallel bars passed quickly, cleared in Zero's usual style. The oxer was rapidly approaching and Heero knew he had to have Zero exactly where he wanted him if he was to make a good turn to the gate after landing over the oxer. Sitting down into his saddle, Heero collected the gray together, containing the energy and then letting Zero go at the last moment.

Zero flew over the oxer and landed, his master checking him back again and Zero responded, settling his weight into his hind quarters and then turning as his master asked.

Duo was chewing on the end of his braid as he watched Heero and his horse take the oxer then sit back and spin around in readiness for the gate.

Zero had been traveling a touch faster than Goose and it took him three strides to make his turn onto the gate. They still managed to make the inner track through, passing a hair's breath inside the rustic rails. Spotting the gate ahead, Zero lengthened his stride and jumped, standing well off from the base line and clearing the gate. They landed and Heero turned his horse for the wall.

Concentration was etched into every line of Heero face as he approached the wall. The spectators were completely silent except for the odd 'ohh or ahh' of appreciation. Duo was shifting his weight from one foot to the other, Otto was smiling softly as he watched the pair completing their course and Treize sat, an amused smile on his face as his eyes went from Heero to the clock and back again.

There was no denying the improvement in the combination. Heero and his horse had been good when Treize had taken over the teaching of the young rider. Being keen and eager to learn, not to mention gifted in some ways, Heero's riding and jumping skills had improved dramatically. The proof was out there now and Treize had no doubts that the young man would achieve his goal of not just riding in the Nations Cup team, but making it to the Olympics as well. Provided his horse was good enough. Judging by the way Zero was going, Treize knew they were a winning combination and the horse shouldn't have many problems contesting an international course.

Zero cleared the wall and landed, giving a slight toss of his head as he looked for the next jump. His master turned him slightly and Zero could see the approaching rails.

Fingers closed on the reins, Heero held the impulsion in check and then let the horse have his head in the last three strides. Legs were applied and Zero bounded over the first element, landed and then with two strides leapt over the second element. Landing over part 'B', Heero was again there with his legs and seat to drive Zero together and they soared into the air over the third element. As Zero touched down Heero drove the gray forward into a gallop for the finish.

Zero gave a small buck as he sprinted to the finish flags and shot through, breaking the timing beam and stopping the clock. As Heero brought his horse back through the paces to a walk, he turned to see what the large red numbers said.

"Clear round in a time of 48.45 seconds," the announcer said.

"Six hundredths of a second," Duo said and looked at Treize.

Treize shrugged as he dismounted and got on Peacemillion. "Them's the breaks," he said with a smile.

Heero exited the ring, patting Zero and looking around for Duo. He felt a little disappointed with the time, but that was how it went in the game of showjumping. He was still thrilled with the performance Zero had given and promised his horse extra treats that night for his efforts.
Zero was busy looking for the long haired human that always had carrots for him.

"Great round, Heero," Duo congratulated as Heero rode up to them. He reached into his pocket and gave Zero a carrot, the horse having nudge him as soon as he was in nudging distance. "There you go, piggy. You were such a good boy."

"You certainly rode well," Otto commented as Heero dismounted. "Damn close!"

Heero smiled. "He was great, wasn't he?" Heero said as he patted Zero’s neck and tried to get a little closer to Duo to bump shoulders with his lover. Before he had a chance, Relena was there and had planted a big kiss to Heero's cheek.

"That was fantastic, Heero. I was sure you had beaten Treize. Not to worry though, I'm certain you will finish second," the woman gushed as she tried to hold Heero's hand.

Heero managed to twist himself slightly and raise his hand out of Relena's way, pretending to be fiddling with Zero's gear. "Thank you," he replied politely. "It's not over yet though, there are still three more riders to go including Treize on your horse."

Duo watched the kiss and attempt to hold Heero's hand. Anger and jealousy flared in his chest, but he was powerless to do anything about the situation. He could only sit back and watch as Heero dealt with the woman as best he could.

"Zero needs walking around to cool him off a bit," Duo said, trying to distract Relena and give Heero a way out.

Relena turned to face the vet. "Well, you're his groom, shouldn't you be walking him around? That's what Otto is doing with Tall Geese."

The words left Duo momentarily stunned and he didn't get the opportunity to say anything as Relena grabbed Heero’s arm and turned him towards the arena where the fourth rider had just pulled a rail on the parallel bars. "Come on, Heero. You should be watching the rest of the competitors, I'm sure your groom can handle the horse."

Heero gave Duo a helpless look as he was dragged to the side of the arena. Duo flashed his lover a suffering smile, letting Heero know he understood and stuck his tongue out at Relena's back. Heero sighed and turned around.

Duo took Zero and began to walk the gray around, still feeding him carrots as they walked. "You sure you can't boot her one, Zero?" he said as he complained to the horse about Relena. "Who the hell does she think she is? Playing up to my Heero like that. Geeze, I wish it had been me to dump her in the shit. What I wouldn't give for a nice sloppy pile of crap and a well timed trip up of her pinkness. Are you sure you don't have the runs, Zero? Can't persuade you to cock your tail and drop a load on her?"

Zero just wuffled and asked for more carrots.

The fourth rider came out of the arena with four penalties and a time of 56.28. The fifth rider entered and set off at a fast pace, doing their best to equal or better Treize's time. Deciding Zero had cooled off enough, Duo began to walk back towards the collecting ring and a spot where he could watch Treize and Peacemillion. Otto joined him with Goose and the pair stood together. Duo could see Heero to the side, Miss Peaceofshit still doggedly holding Heero's hand.

Treize rode up and immediately picked up on the tension in Duo. He wondered where Heero was and scanned around. Spotting the dark haired rider with Relena attached, he knew then the reason for
Duo's annoyance. He couldn't voice his concerns so gave the vet a sympathetic smile instead and made a mental note to try and keep Relena from attending shows in the future.

The fifth rider dropped rails on two jumps and came out of the ring with eight faults and a time of 49.23. Now it was Treize's turn. He rode into the ring amid calls of good luck from his friends and fellow competitors.

Saluting the judge, Treize headed for the start flags, his strategy clear in his mind. Knowing how long Peacemillion's stride was, Treize wasn't about to push the horse. Taking it steady was his game plan.

The bell went and Treize commenced his round, starting off slowly and letting the stallion find his rhythm. They cleared the cross rails and parallel bars with ease. The oxer appeared and Peacemillion sailed over it. Treize opted to go for the longer run to the gate rather than try to adjust the gray's stride and rode the big horse around the outside of the rustic rails to line him up for the gate. The stallion responded well and cleared the gate.

The wall loomed ahead and Treize collected the horse up, steadying him and then riding on. Peacemillion cleared the wall and was bearing down on the triple. They jumped the first element and then the second. Peacemillion pecked a little on landing but recovered and then grunted as he leapt over the third part of the triple. He landed clean on the other side and Treize encouraged the stallion to gallop for the finish flags.

"Clear round in a time of 58.34," the announcer said.

Treize praised the stallion as he rode towards the exit. He could see Otto there with Goose, a broad smile on his face. Duo was beside him, also smiling. He couldn't see Relena or Heero though. Riding out and pulling up beside the other two, Heero appeared at his side, Relena still hanging on to Heero's hand.

"Well done, Treize," Heero managed to say and also freed his hand from Relena to shake Treize's.

"Thanks," Treize replied as he shook hands with the young man. "I thought it better not to push him, just take it steady and see how he coped."

"Great round, boss," Otto offered as he took the gray's reins and handed Goose's reins over.

"You guys need to mount up again, they're calling for you to go back into the ring for presentations," Duo said from where he was holding Zero. His voice had an edge to it.

Taking Zero's reins from Duo, Heero managed to lean in and whisper, "I'm sorry," to Duo before mounting up.

"Not your fault," Duo replied as he handed Heero his whip.

"I promise to make it up to you later," Heero said as he fiddled with his stirrup, bringing his head closer to where Duo was standing so no one else would hear his words.

"Really?" Duo grinned.

"Whatever you want," Heero breathed and gave his lover a seductive smile.

Conversation was cut then as the announcer called for the six riders to enter the arena for the presentation of rosettes and prizes.
Treize rode Goose in, leading Peacemillion, Heero followed and then the others rode behind. The judge congratulated each of them, placing the blue rosette on Goose's bridle, the white on Peacemillion's and the red on Zero's. Then he continued down the line up, putting the green fourth, yellow fifth and brown sixth on the other competitors' horses.

The usual canter around the ring was reduced to a trot as Treize was leading Peacemillion and so safety was put first. As they exited so Relena was standing there with Otto, Duo to the other side, waiting to congratulate them all.

Heero did his best to ride off to the side, but Relena wasn't about to let him go so easily. After congratulating Treize and making a fuss of Peacemillion, she turned her attentions to Heero. Immediately Duo's hackles rose and he tried to put himself between his boyfriend and the parasite. Relena wasn't easily dissuaded though.

"I said you'd finish in the top three," she began smugly.

Heero just hn'd and went back to loosening Zero's girth.

"Heero?" Relena began.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to take you out to dinner tonight to celebrate. There's a nice restaurant called the Hunter's Lodge."

Heero didn't give the woman a chance to finish. He could feel Duo bristling, noted the look of fire in those violet eyes and was quick off the mark. "Thank you, but no thanks."

"Why not?" Relena wasn't used to being rejected.

"I have things to do when I get back home. Zero needs to be settled..."

"Isn't that why you have your groom?" Relena snapped.

"Duo is not my groom," Heero snapped back.

"Then if he isn't your groom, what is he doing here?"

"He's my," Heero hesitated for a second, feeling the sudden fear rolling off Duo. "He's my friend and offered to help me at shows. Zero is my responsibility and it's up to me to look after him when we get back."

Relena frowned and thought for a moment. "It won't take you long to settle him. I'll call by and pick you up around seven."

"No. Relena, I don't just have Zero to sort out. I've got another two horses that need to be fed as well. I've also got the books to do for Duo's vet practice." Heero didn't know what he was explaining himself, he didn't owe this woman anything.

Duo was fidgeting, longing to interrupt and tell the woman to fuck off, Heero wasn't interested, but he held his tongue. Heero needed to battle this one on his own.

"Why can't he do his own books? Is he dumb or something?"

Duo only just managed to stop his hand from snaking out and slapping the woman. He quickly diverted it and patted Zero's neck, a little harder than he'd intended. Zero could feel the tension in the
nice human and his master and it upset him. He didn't know why they were tense, but it usually meant something unpleasant was around. Nervously he shifted, jerking his head and looking for the cause of distress to his master and the nice human.

Unfortunately for Relena, she was standing in the way and Zero bumped against her, stepping on her foot as he shifted his weight.

"Ow!" Relena cried out and shoved at Zero. "Get off my foot, you clumsy animal!" she cried out and then burst into tears.

Zero immediately swung around, frightened by the yelling, Duo doing his best to calm the horse.

"Better let me take a look at that," Duo said as he watched Relena pulling her shoe off to inspect the damage.

"No, thank you. You're a vet, not a doctor. I'm not having you touch me." Relena turned her eyes back to her foot where a black and purple bruise was beginning to form. "It feels like it's broken," she wailed.

"Better get to a doctor and have it looked at," remarked Otto who had watched the goings on with amusement.

"I can't walk, let alone drive. Someone will have to carry me back to the car and drive me to the hospital," she sniffled and spun her head to look at Heero.

Heero quickly ducked behind Zero, pretending he hadn't heard or seen the look.

"I'll take you, Relena," Treize interrupted. "I'll give Otto a hand to load the horses and stow the gear, then he can drive the truck back to the stables and I'll take you in your car to the hospital."

Seeing as how she had no way out, Relena had to give in. "Okay," she said and continued to sniff. Heero gave a sigh of relief.

Duo patted Zero and stuffed him with more carrots. A big grin was on his face as he petted and made a fuss of the gray. "Perfect timing, Zero. I couldn't have done it better myself. You're a good boy."

Zero didn't know what it was he'd done, but if it kept the carrots coming he'd gladly do it again.

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tbc...
Chapter 19

Treize didn't give Relena the chance to ask Heero to carry her, he stepped forward and picked the woman up in his arms and headed in the direction of the horse truck. Duo led Zero back to the stables, Otto leading Peacemillion and Heero took Goose. Once they were back at the stables, Duo took charge of Zero, unsaddling and getting the horse ready for the trip home. Heero gave Otto a hand with the other two, rugging and bandaging Goose whilst dodging around Duck who was determined to get in his way.

The three men didn't say much to each other, there wasn't really anything to discuss. Duo was secretly pleased that Zero had stepped on the pink parasite, although he hoped her foot was only bruised. Heero was worried Relena's foot was broken and felt bad that his horse had been the one to inflict the injury.

Otto thought it was just desserts.

Treize returned to the stables just as the guys were preparing to cart all the gear back to the truck and Heero's float.

"How is she?" Heero asked out of politeness.

"She's okay. I've put her in the front of the truck for the moment and bandaged her foot. She should be fine while we get the gear back and then the horses loaded up. Once that's done I'll go get her car and take her to the emergency department of the hospital."

"I wish she would let me take a look at it," said Duo as he emerged from the locker, arms full of Zero's gear. "I know I'm only a vet, but the basics aren't all that different. I'm pretty sure I would be able to get a good idea if her foot is broken or not."

"I agree with you, Doctor Maxwell, but she's adamant about going to the hospital and having a 'proper' doctor look at it."

"If it is broken then she will have to stay off it," mused Otto. "Maybe then we will get a little peace around the stables."

Treize opted not to say anything, as did Heero. It was clear though by the expressions on their respective faces that they agreed with Otto. The men soon carried all the gear back to their respective vehicles, Heero dumping what he'd carried of Treize's by the side of the truck to avoiding having to deal with the whining woman. He'd had enough of Relena for one day.

He did feel sorry for her though and again silently hoped that her foot wasn't broken. Didn't mean he needed to have her bending his ear and expecting him to take her to the hospital. Heero just wanted to get home, settle his horse and share some snuggle time with his boyfriend. He'd sorely missed Duo's gentle touches and being able to hold his lover. Unfortunately they couldn't show any affection for each other in public, to do so would cause more problems that it was worth. A touch to his shoulder drew Heero from his thoughts and he turned to meet concerned violet.

"You okay, Heero?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."
"You sure?"

Heero lowered his voice to a whisper. "I was just thinking how good it's going to be to get back home and hold you."

Duo's face softened and a smile tugged at his lips. "Let's go get Zero then. The sooner we leave, the sooner we get home and then you can cuddle me all you like."

Heero didn't need any further prompting. Turning, he quickly strode back to the stables to fetch Zero.

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The ride home was uneventful. When they pulled into the stable yard, Heero unloaded Zero and put him in his stable. Duo began the task of carting all the gear from the car to the tack room and putting it away while Heero unhitched the float. Once the gear was taken care of, Duo headed up to the house and surgery to check on Hilde and the day's clients. Heero remained in the stables, putting in the feeds and then fetching Scythe and Shini in, rugging them up for the night and finishing off the stable duties.

When Heero made it to the house, Hilde was sitting in the kitchen with Duo, sharing a cup of coffee and giggling hysterically at the day's events. Duo shoved a cup of coffee into Heero's hand, the rider taking it gratefully and then sitting down.

"Congratulations, Heero," Hilde began. "Duo tells me you made an excellent showing."

Heero smiled. "We did okay."

"Sheesh! Duo tells me you were only beaten by six hundredths of a second. I'd say that qualifies for more than okay."

"I just hope the selectors were impressed."

"I'm sure they will be, Heero," Duo said as he leaned back in his chair.

"Duo also tells me you're training Zero to be a killer of pink," Hilde snickered.

"Huh?" Heero looked a little bewildered for a moment.

"From what Duo has said, it would appear you have a leech problem, and a bad one at that." Hilde couldn't help teasing the rider.

"She's not that bad," replied Heero.

"I also heard you stole Duo's idea."

"What?" Heero looked at the woman.

"Duo wanted to dump her in a shit heap but you beat him to it."

"It was an accident!" Heero tried to defend himself, although why he bothered he didn't know. Once Hilde and Duo got together and ganged up on him he might as well dig his grave and then bury himself in it.

"Sure it was. Shame you didn't get pictures."

"Hilde!"
"You can't tell me that you weren't a little pleased she ended up in the shit."

"That's not the point!"

"From what I can gather, she more than deserved it, plastering herself on you all the time and rubbing Duo. Why if I'd have been there I'd have soon set her straight." Hilde continued on her little rant.

"You can't solve anything with violence," Heero said.

"Maybe not, but it would sure make you feel a whole lot better," snickered Hilde.

"She's not as bad as you might think." Why he was defending the woman, Heero wasn't sure.

"Not bad?" Duo exclaimed. "I swear that woman is a few prawns short of a barbecue!"

Feeling he was getting in deeper by the second, Heero decided to quit while he was behind. "I'll give Treize a call and see if there's any news on Relena and her foot yet." Heero left the pair to their own devices, knowing he was fighting a losing battle and went through to the lounge room to make his call.

The 'phone rang out so Heero assumed that Treize must either still be at the hospital or at Relena's. He'd give it another hour and then try again. Walking back into the kitchen, he was pleased to hear the pair discussing the day's clients and cases and not Relena.

"Any news?" Duo asked as Hero sat down again.

"No. No one's home yet. I'll try again later."

"Okay." Duo turned back to Hilde and their chat.

Heero finished his coffee, washed his cup out and decided to take his shower, leaving the two vets to continue their 'business' talk. When he returned to the kitchen twenty minutes later, Hilde was leaving.

"I'll see you in a day or two, Heero," Hilde said as she gave the rider a quick hug. Her voice turned serious then as she added, "Don't worry too much about that woman. I'm sure the damage to her foot isn't too bad. Hopefully she has gotten the hint and will leave you alone from now on."

"Can't see it happening," muttered Heero, "but thanks anyway."

Hilde left and Heero started on dinner while Duo took his shower. He was busy chopping up the vegetables when a pair of arms entwined themselves around his waist and warm skin pressed against his back. Heero leaned into the embrace, his eyes closing as he savored the warmth of his partner.

"Love you," Duo whispered against the skin of Heero's neck and then feathered kisses along Heero's nape.

"Love you too," replied Heero, the knife stilling in his hand as he tilted his head and his eyes closed in pleasure.

"How long until dinner is ready?" Duo's lips continued in their kissing.

"About half an hour. It's stir fry."

"Sounds delicious. What about dessert?"
Heero could feel his nether regions stirring with Duo's gentle worship of his throat. "Dessert will be served in the master bedroom after the main course."

Duo shivered. "Mmmm. I think I like the sound of that."

Turning around in his lover's arms, Heero took Duo's mouth in a searing kiss, one that let his boyfriend know how much he loved the vet. "Thanks for putting up with Relena today," he said as they parted for air.

"No problem, Heero. I have to protect what's mine, don't I?"

Heero chuckled. "I'd better get back to cooking dinner."

Reluctantly, Duo let his partner go and began to set the table for dinner.

* * *

Sitting down at the table a short while later, Duo inhaled the aroma of their meal. "Smells great, Heero," he said and picked up his fork.

"Thanks." Heero began to dig in. He was hungry and it was getting late.

Not much was said during the meal, both men were too busy eating to talk. Once the meal was finished, Duo collected the dishes and began to wash up while Heero went through to the lounge to try calling Treize again.

Duo had almost finished the dishes when Heero came back into the kitchen and picked up the tea towel. Giving his partner a couple of moments, Duo pulled the plug from the sink and dried his hands.

"Did you manage to get someone this time?" Duo asked as he filled the kettle.

"Yeah. Treize was back."

"What did he say?"

Heero continued to dry the dishes as he spoke. "Treize took her through to the emergency department and they checked her out. They did some x-rays and while there's no actual fracture, there are a couple of cracked metatarsal bones."

"Oh."

"She's got a plaster cast on which will need to stay in place for about six weeks."

Duo took the tea towel from Heero's fingers, dropped it to the bench top and then cuddled his boyfriend close. "I'm sorry, Heero. I was hoping it would only be soft tissue damage."

Heero sighed. "It's not your fault, Duo."

"And it's not your fault either, Heero, so don't go blaming yourself. This was just one of those things. Accidents happen all the time, Relena was just unfortunate to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Zero didn't do it on purpose, you of all people should know that horses are unpredictable animals. She should know that too."

"I know. I can't help but feel bad about it though."
Deciding to help his lover forget, Duo claimed Heero's lips in a tender kiss, tongue gently exploring Heero's mouth, stroking over known sensitive spots and sending all thought from Heero's brain. When they broke apart, Duo gave a soft smile and ran his hands down Heero's back to cup his ass and squeeze.

"Let me make love to you, Heero."

Moaning softly, Heero pressed his growing hardness against Duo's groin and rubbed. "Please," he answered softly.

Taking Heero's hand, Duo led them both to the bedroom then kissed his boyfriend again as he pushed him slowly to the mattress. Once they were both lying comfortably side by side, Duo's hands and fingers began to explore Heero's body. Neither one of them was wearing a shirt, sweat pants being the preferred item of clothing after they had taken their showers. Duo's teeth scraped against a tender nipple, teasing and suckling, encouraging the nub to harden.

Lost in a haze of growing need, Heero bucked his hips and arched as the pleasure began to infiltrate his nervous system. His fingers began to trace idle patterns on the skin of Duo's back as his nipples were teased and tormented.

Continuing to suckle lightly, Duo let his hand wander over Heero's stomach, the muscles quivering under the skin with his touch. His hand worked lower, brushing over the waist band of Heero's sweats before diving underneath the fabric. He found Heero's rising hardness and curled his fingers around the length, stroking gently.

"Ahh. More, Duo," Heero moaned as he shifted on the bed.

Chuckling at his lover's need, Duo took pity on his partner and ceased his feasting on Heero's nipple. He drew himself up, slid his hand out of Heero's sweats and grabbed the waist band, tugging lightly. "Off!" he demanded.

Heero raised his hips and assisted Duo to remove his sweats. He wore no underwear, something Duo's eyes appreciated if the look they were giving Heero was anything to go by. "Yours too," Heero ground out and reached for Duo's sweats.

The vet slipped the soft garment from his form, his boxers following at the same time and then lay back down next to the rider. Hands began to roam again, Duo's over Heero's back and buttocks, Heero's over Duo's thighs and stomach. Unable to deny themselves any further, Duo slid his fingers along Heero's crevice while Heero took Duo's half hard cock into his hand and encouraged it to stiffen fully.

Moans and pants were music to their ears; fingers stroked, toyed and teased, playing each others bodies like fine tuned instruments. Sliding a hand underneath the pillow, Duo found the almost empty tube and brought it out. As he squeezed the gel to his fingers he spoke his thoughts out loud.

"We need to add lube to the shopping list," Duo murmured.

"Maybe we should buy a box of the stuff," panted Heero.

"I think that would give the locals a bit too much information," Duo snickered.

"Good point," moaned Heero. They only bought a tube at a time and it was always Duo that purchased it. No questions were asked as with Duo being a vet, he used stuff such as lube in his daily treatment of animals. If they were to buy a box...
"I think we will stick to a tube at a time, Heero," Duo murmured as he slipped his finger inside Heero's channel and began the task of loosening Heero's anal ring.

Heero didn't bother to think any more, instead he gave himself over to the sensations of pleasure that were invading his senses. Duo's finger stretched him, stroking his inner walls and loosening the muscles. As he stretched so a second finger was added and then a third. Heero's body softened, accepting the intrusion and welcoming it.

Deeming Heero to be ready for him, Duo removed his fingers and quickly lubed his cock. Heero shifted on the bed, laying on his back and opening his legs up for Duo who settled between them. Duo guided his cock head to the slicked opening and then began the slow forward push into paradise.

The muscles were tight, not wanting to let Duo in, but the vet persisted and steadily his cock pushed forth and entered Heero. Once he was seated to the hilt, Duo paused and rolled his hips slightly. "Wouldn't Miss Peaceofcrap have a tizzy fit if she could see you now, Heero? The object of her desire, spread open, impaled on my cock and thoroughly enjoying it. I'm sure she would be over the moon."

"Shut up and move, Duo," Heero growled and flexed the muscles of his sheath.

"Ohhh, aren't we a little impatient."

"I don't want to be reminded of Relena. I'm not interested in her at all, I want you. Now, make love to me like you promised to."

"Pushy, pushy," snickered Duo, but he began to withdraw, only to slam back in again.

Duo built a steady rhythm, plunging in and out of Heero's willing body, enjoying the feeling of Heero's moist, hot channel caressing his length as he stroked along those muscular walls. Heero was also in heaven. With each slide of Duo's cock, whether it be in or out, the rich nerves of his back passage were teased, rubbed against and tormented.

The pace was leisurely, bringing them both slowly to the brink. Duo was determined to have Heero screaming his name and forgetting all about the pink parasite. He reached between their sweating bodies and wrapped his fingers around Heero's cock, stroking steadily in time with his thrusts.

Heero began to push up, meeting Duo's thrusts with his own. He wanted his lover deep inside, the deeper the better. Duo's hips pumped steadily and as Heero rose to meet him so the head of Duo's cock hit that sweet spot, sending Heero's channel into a spasm of pleasure as liquid fire tore through his veins.

"Ah!" screamed Heero. "Yes! More, Duo. Deeper, harder," he moaned as he writhed beneath the vet, desperate to feel those sensations again.

Speeding up his thrusts and strokes, Duo knew it wouldn't be long before Heero succumbed to the pleasure. His own orgasm was building steadily, the heat flaring in his groin as he continued to rock.

They grunted, sweated and moved together, climbing ever closer to the pinnacle, both reluctant yet eager to reach it and fall down the other side. Duo sped up the movement of his hand on Heero's length and angled his hips to try and brush Heero's prostate again. Another scream from his boyfriend told him he'd done just that.

All sanity left Heero as he climbed higher and higher, his world narrowed to the hand currently fisting his cock and the hardness inside his channel. Duo felt wonderful inside, the steely hardness
pushing against his inner walls and reminding him of just how much Duo loved him. Another brush against his prostate and he was gone, falling over the edge into ultimate bliss as his climax ripped through him and spilled from his cock to coat Duo's hand and his own belly.

The muscular contractions of Heero's passage drove Duo to near insanity. Combined with the moans coming from his lover, Duo tumbled over the precipice and into nirvana. As his orgasm claimed him, Duo bit down on Heero's neck, squeezing his lover's cock and crying out, "Mine!"

Shudders and trembles passed through their respective bodies as they each rode their climaxes to the full, savoring and enjoying the overwhelming pleasure. Gradually their breathing and heart rates began to slow, cool air washed over heated skin, reminding them both of their nakedness.

With a soft grunt, Duo pulled from within Heero's body and pushed himself to the side. He raised his hand and studied the fluid there. Bringing his fingers to his mouth, Duo began to lick Heero's seed from his hand and fingers.

Heero cracked open an eye and watched his lover cleaning his hand. A shiver passed through his tired body and a warm flush spread over his skin. Duo looked gorgeous licking his fingers, the happy, sated glow to Duo's skin adding the final touch of perfection to the lovely man.

"That was great, Duo," Heero sighed as he snuggled closer. "Thank you."

"Believe me when I say it was my pleasure, Heero," Duo returned, a smile on his face.

"I suppose we should clean up, but I'm too tired to move."

Duo laughed. "I'll go get a cloth, I don't fancy waking up all sticky." Duo climbed off the bed and fetched a warm wash cloth. When he returned, he cleaned them both off and then took the cloth back to the bathroom. While he was gone, Heero pulled the comforter back and crawled under the sheets.

Switching off the bedside lamp, Duo climbed into the bed and was immediately enveloped in Heero's strong arms. Happily, he snuggled close.

* * *

Walking up the path to the back of the house, Heero smiled to himself. A week had passed since the show, a week of peace for him. Relena's doctor had forbidden her to walk on her foot for two weeks. After the two weeks she would be allowed to move around with the aid of crutches and was under strict orders to put as little weight as possible on her injured foot.

That meant that Heero hadn't been bothered by the woman at all. He'd enjoyed a week of working the horses at Treize's in peace and had another week of peace to go before Relena would undoubtedly make her presence known again. At least with her on crutches he should be able to make a fast get away.

"Duo?" Heero called out as he entered the house. Silence greeted him so Heero assumed that Duo must be up at the surgery. Letting himself out again, Heero headed for the practice.

Walking along the corridor from the back entry to the surgery, Heero could hear Duo's voice up ahead. He walked into the reception office where Duo was sitting, chatting to Catherine as the receptionist was typing away at the computer.

Seeing his boyfriend walk into the reception office, Duo bounced to his feet. "Heero!" He enveloped his lover in a hug and planted a sloppy kiss to Heero's cheek.
Heero returned the hug and kiss before releasing his lover. "How was your day?"

"Fine. Not much in the way of excitement. How was yours?"

"Peaceful. No Relena."

Duo grinned. "Oh, Heero, there's some mail come for you." Duo reached over to the desk and picked up a brown envelope, handing it to Heero who took it and gazed at it.

Heero turned the envelope over in his hand. It was an official looking piece, but there wasn't any sender's address on it so Heero didn't have a clue who it could be from.

"Aren't you gonna open it?" Duo asked as he sat down again.

"I guess I should." Heero turned the envelope over and began to peel it open. He withdrew the paper from inside and opened it out. He began to read.

Duo watched, chewing nervously on his bottom lip, noting the emotions flickering across his lover's face as Heero's eyes scanned the page. A slow smile began to appear and Duo relaxed a touch, he had been concerned it was bad news.

As Heero read down the letter, his heart began to pound, his lips turned into a smile and then a full on grin. By the time he'd gotten to the end of the letter he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Good news?" asked Duo as he watched Heero's face light up.

"You bet!" Heero lunged forwards and grabbed Duo, pulling him from the chair and hugging him tight, planting kisses on every bit of exposed skin he could find.

Duo laughed under the onslaught and hugged back. "It must be excellent news to incur a reaction like that. What did you do? Win the lottery or something?" Duo chuckled as he managed to disentangle himself from his exuberant boyfriend. To the side, Catherine watched, her lips curled into an amused smile.

"Better than that!" Heero crowed. "Here, read it for yourself," he added and thrust the letter at Duo. "I've been selected! I made it, Duo!"

Duo's face split into a wide grin and took the letter. "You did?! Heero, that's great!" Duo quickly scanned the letter.

"What did you make, Heero?" asked Catherine politely.

"I'm on the short list for the Nations Cup team," announced Heero proudly.

"Congratulations!" Catherine stood up and gave the accountant a hug and peck to the cheek.

"Thanks." Heero blushed a little.

Duo finished scanning the page and then began to read bits of it out aloud. "The equestrian selection board hereby announce that Mr Heero Yuy and his horse Zero have been short listed for the Nations Cup team. A training camp is currently being organized and your presence will be requested at the camp for two weeks. At the end of the two weeks the final team to represent Australia will be selected. You will be contacted again once the dates and venue for the camp have been finalized. Should you not wish to participate, please contact the board at your earliest convenience. Congratulations and thank you. We will be in touch soon. Regards, H Miller, Chief Selector."
handed the letter back to Heero.

"That's great news, Heero. I'm so proud of you!" Duo grabbed Heero and proceeded to kiss him senseless.

"I wonder if Treize has had a letter?" Heero said when Duo let him surface for air.

"Give him a call," said Duo. "Oh, Zero! I have to go and congratulate Zero!" Duo enthused. "This calls for a real celebration, Heero. I'm gonna go give Zero a bucketful of carrots, he deserves them. Err, once you've called Treize, you wanna give the Chang Palace a call and reserve us a table for dinner? My treat!" Duo added when he saw the look beginning to surface on Heero's face.

Shaking his head at Duo's enthusiasm, Heero agreed. "Okay. I'll book us a table for eight."

"Thanks!" Duo took off through the surgery and heading for the stables where the carrots were to fill up a bucket of them and take them out to Zero.

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tbc...
Chapter 20

While Duo was out in the paddock congratulating Zero, Heero made his call to Treize. The former silver medalist had indeed received a letter that day, congratulating him on making the short list with Goose. Heero couldn't help but laugh when Treize said he hoped the team trainer and manager wouldn't mind Duck coming along as well to the camp.

They chatted for a few more minutes, sharing their excitement and congratulating each other again before Heero hung up and called the Chang Palace to reserve a table for two at eight that evening. With the calls out of the way, Heero decided to go out to the paddock and see how Duo was faring with Zero and a bucket of carrots.

* * *

Duo picked up an empty plastic bucket and went through to the feed shed where the carrots were kept. He filled the bucket with the orange treats and then headed for the paddock. Zero saw the nice human coming and spotted the bucket.

‘Food’, his brain said and with a whinny, Zero trotted over to the gate to meet the nice human.

Scythe and Shini looked up from their grazing when they heard the stallion call out, their curiosity aroused. Spotting the man with the bucket, both mare and colt sauntered over to the gates of their respective paddocks to see if they couldn't 'cage' some of whatever it was that was on offer.

Duo put the bucket on the ground and climbed through the fence, reaching an arm back and snagging the bucket to bring it through as well. He took out a carrot and fed it to the gray. Patting the muscled neck, Duo began to tell Zero all about the letter and the selection to the team short list.

Zero listened with half an ear. He could sense the human was happy about something and the carrots told him it had something to do with him; what that was, Zero didn't know. And he didn't really care either, he just wanted more of those carrots. He nuded the nice human and asked for more.

Duo chuckled. "Here you go, boy. You're one heck of a horse, Zero. I hope you can keep up with the winning streak. Being selected means the world to your master and I just know you're both good enough to do the country proud." Duo fed the stallion a couple more carrots.

Zero wolfed down the carrots and began to push for more, nudging and nibbling at the nice human.

"Steady on, piggy. No need to bolt them down, there's plenty more," Duo laughed as Zero began to push his arm.

Scythe gave a neigh and Shini joined in. They wanted some attention too!

"Okay, okay. I'm coming to you two in a second. Hold your horses," Duo said as he fed Zero some more carrots. The gray's mouth was stuffed so full that bits of carrot were falling out onto the ground, but Zero still pushed for more.

Heero walked down towards the paddock and spotted Duo with Zero. His lips quirked into a grin as he observed the stallion starting to get a little too pushy with the vet, nudging and shoving for more carrots. Heero knew just how demanding the stallion could get when carrots were on the menu.

Before Heero had a chance to call out to Duo and warn him, Zero nudged again, a bit harder this
time. Duo lost his balance and ended up flat on his back in the paddock, carrots raining down around him. Heero broke into a jog, trying not to laugh as Duo lay, arms flailing, trying to fight Zero off.

"You okay?" Heero asked as he climbed through the fence. "Zero! Enough!" Heero's voice took on a strong tone as he reprimanded the stallion.

Zero looked suitably sheepish and backed off, vacuuming up the carrots that had landed a little away from the nice human.

"I'm fine, Heero," Duo replied as he took the offered hand and pulled himself to his feet, dusting his jeans off. "He took me by surprise."

"I think he's forgotten his manners," said Heero as he grabbed Zero's halter. "Bad boy!"

Zero lowered his head and looked ashamed of himself.

"It's okay, Heero. He didn't hurt me and it wasn't intentional. It was my own fault really, I should have known better than to hop in the paddock with a bucketful of carrots."

Zero raised his head and blew softly through his nostrils at Duo. He gave the vet a soft push with his nose as if in apology.

"You're forgiven, Zero. No harm done," chuckled Duo as he rubbed the velvet muzzle. "I think the other two would like some carrots though, that's if there's any left."

Happy that his boyfriend was okay, Heero gave Duo a hand to pick up the scattered carrots and put them back into the bucket. They left Zero munching on a few and then climbed back through the fence to give Scythe and Shini their share.

"I reserved us a table for eight o'clock," Heero said.

"Thanks."

"Treize got a letter too. He's on the short list as well."

"That's great!"

"He's a little worried about taking Duck along."

Duo broke out into a laugh. "I can't see that the selectors will have much of a choice. From what you've all been telling me about short stuff, Goose won't jump if he's not there."

Heero grinned. "Too true. Could make for some real fun if Treize makes it to the final team though."

"Surely they wouldn't stop Duck from going with the team to wherever it is the competition is being held? Just where is it being held anyway?" Up until now, Duo hadn't even thought about the Cup and where it would be hosted.

"It's being held at the Equestrian center in Sydney," Heero replied. "New Zealand hosted the last one, this time it's Australia's turn to host it."

"Ah. I guess Sydney's not as far to go as Auckland."

"Not as expensive either."

"Do you get funding?" asked Duo as he gave Scythe the last carrot and began to walk back to the
stables with Heero.

"No, not really. You can try to get your own sponsorship, but there isn't a lot of that around. Mostly you have to pay for it yourself. As you can imagine, it's not cheap to send a horse and rider to compete Internationally."

"But other athletes get financial backing, why don't the equestrian teams?" Duo could understand and appreciate that it wasn't cheap to compete on a horse, but surely when they were representing their country their expenses should be paid?

"Other athletes do. It's just too costly I suppose for the government to support the equestrian teams."

"Well, that sucks," replied Duo. "How are you going to cope if you do make the team? I'm quite happy to sponsor you with what little I can from the practice, Heero. It's not much, but it's something."

Heero stopped and pulled Duo to him. Wrapping his strong arms around the vet, he gazed into those sincere, violet eyes. "Duo, I appreciate the offer, but I know the practice can't afford to sponsor me. Luckily, the competition is being held in Sydney so all it will cost me is the fuel for the trip down there and accommodation at a hotel near the venue. I'm not rich, but I can stretch to that."

Duo smiled. "The offer is there if you need it, Heero," he said quietly.

Heero kissed his lover and then smiled. "Thanks. Come on, we'd better get a move on. I've got the horses to work and you have evening consults in half an hour."

"Shit!" Duo turned and continued to walk back to the stables. "Hopefully there won't be too many clients this evening and we will get to the restaurant on time."

Chuckling softly, Heero followed along behind the vet.

* * *

At precisely eight that evening Heero and Duo arrived at the Chang palace. Heero held the door open for Duo and then followed inside. Rich smells teased their nostrils and Heero's stomach growled.

"Good evening, Doctor Maxwell, Mr. Yuy."

"Hello, Meiran. How have you been?" replied Duo. Heero nodded.

"Very well, thank you. And you?"

"Fine, thanks. How are Wufei and Xander?"

"Wufei is well, Xander is in need of a nail trim though. I keep meaning to bring him down to the surgery, but I always seem to run out of time," replied the Chinese woman. "I have reserved you one of our quieter tables this evening, Doctor Maxwell. If you would follow me."

Heero followed behind Duo as they made their way through the tables to the one Meiran had reserved for them. The Chinese woman placed the menus on the table as the men took their seats.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'd love a lemon, lime and bitters," said Duo.
"Make that two, please," Heero added.

The woman disappeared to fetch the drinks leaving Heero and Duo to read through the menus. She returned a couple of minutes later and set the drinks down.

Having decided what they wanted to eat, Duo ordered for the both of them and then picked up his drink and touching the glass against Heero's he said, "Here's to making the final team, Heero. Congratulations."

Heero felt his heart warm and a smile grace his lips.

"Are you celebrating something special?" Meiran asked. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry, but I couldn't help overhearing."

"It's okay, Meiran. Heero here has been short listed for the Australian Nations Cup team," Duo announced proudly.

"Ahh. Congratulations, Mr Yuy." Meiran smiled. "Would you mind explaining what that means?"

Duo chuckled softly to himself at Heero's expression and sat back to let the rider explain.

* * *

"I've never seen anything like that before, Mr Styles," said Duo as he straightened up and gave the filly a pat.

"Me neither," replied the man. "And I've been around horses for years."

Duo smiled and looked at the filly again. She was a sweet thing, only a yearling and with a promising future ahead; providing he could do something to help. Duo scratched the back of his neck as he studied the filly again.

"Can you help her?"

Good question.

Duo mentally ran the anatomy of the horse's lower leg through his mind and then bent down to feel the filly's cannon bone. Just above the fetlock a partially grown, fifth hoof protruded. Duo had no idea why Mother Nature would do such a thing. More to the point, what could he do about rectifying the mistake?

"I'd like to get a couple of x-rays of her leg, Mr Styles, see exactly how this is attached to the cannon bone. Once I have the x-rays I'll be able to tell what the options are."

"Fine. Take the x-rays then and we can work from there."

"Thanks." Duo ducked into the small room attached to the stables and wheeled out his portable x-ray machine. Five minutes later, he had it all set up to go and handed Mr Styles a lead apron. "Here, put that on and then stand by her head to keep her still please."

Styles did as asked and spoke soothingly to the filly, keeping her calm and relaxed while Duo took the 'pictures'.

"Thanks. I'll take these through and develop them, we should have an answer in a few minutes."

Duo disappeared into his small room again and shut the door.
Ten minutes passed, Mr Styles removed his apron and lay it on the small bench, returning to the yearling and pulling affectionately on her ears as he waited for the vet and the diagnosis. The door opened and Styles turned to see Duo walking out, films in his hand and a thoughtful look on his face.

"So?" Styles asked.

"Come and take a look," replied Duo and slipped the pictures onto the light board, flipping the switch so the light came on and illuminated the x-rays. "Here is the cannon bone," Duo pointed with a pencil, tracing the bone on the x-ray. "And here you can see where the fifth hoof has developed."

"Ah." Mr Styles squinted as he studied the picture. "What can we do about it?"

"Judging by what I can see, the cannon bone is thicker here where the extra hoof has grown. I should be able to surgically remove the hoof, reshape the cannon bone a bit and you should have a normal, healthy yearling again."

Mr Styles grunted. "Risks?"

"There's always risks with large animal surgery, Mr Styles. With horses it's shock. The longer they're under anesthetic the greater the risk of shock. This shouldn't take too long though, especially if I have another vet assist me. The filly is young too which goes in her favor."

Mr Styles looked from the vet to the filly and back again. "When can you do it?"

Duo ran a mental check of his bookings. "Tomorrow afternoon?"

"Fine. Book her in then."

"Okay. I'll need you to come up to the surgery and fill out the forms. I'll need her to stay here tonight and depending on how the surgery goes, she should be okay to go home in two or three days."

"All right, young man. You just do your best and look after her. Melody here has got good bloodlines and I'm hoping she will be a champion on the race track."

"I'll look after her, Mr Styles," Duo smiled. "Now, if you would like to follow me." Duo took the man through to the surgery and had him fill out the appropriate forms, once they were done, Mr Styles left, Duo assuring him that he would call as soon as the surgery was finished and let him know how it had gone.

Hilde appeared as the man left and quirked an eyebrow. Duo pointed to the surgery bookings diary.

"Removal of fifth hoof?" she questioned.

"Yup."

"I've never seen anything like that before. Mind if I come down to the stables and watch when you do the surgery?"

"You'll be doing more than watching, Hilde. I'd like you to assist."

"Great!" The female vet beamed. "Is the horse here now?"

"Yeah. She's down in the crush. I'd better go back and pop her into a paddock."

"Okay if I tag along and have a look?"
"Come on. I'd like you to take a look anyway and see what you think. I've got a pretty good idea how I'm going to tackle the surgery, but I'd like your input too."

"Right with you, boss."

Leaving the surgery, Duo and Hilde headed back to the stables. As they were approaching so Heero pulled in. Seeing the pair heading for the stable block, Heero followed.

"Something up?" Heero asked as he stepped inside and spotted the horse in the crush. "Nice animal," he added.

"Yeah, she's got a big future on the race track if we are successful," replied Duo.

"What's the problem?"

"Well, I'll be," muttered Hilde as she bent down to examine the filly's leg. "Ever seen a five hoofed horse, Heero?"

"Huh?" Heero moved to the crush and squatted, his eyes traveling to where Hilde pointed. Heero gave a whistle. "Never seen anything like that before. What exactly is it?"

"It's a deformity. I'd say the genetics were possibly a little off and this little girl decided to throw back to her ancestors, the ones that had three toes instead of one hoof," said Duo with a grin.

"Can you fix it?" Heero straightened.

"I'm pretty sure we can. Come and take a look at the x-rays." Duo led Hilde and Heero to the board where the x-rays remained. Hilde ran a practiced eye over them, Heero stood with his mouth open.

"Looks complicated to me," Heero muttered.

"Not really. In layman's terms, it's just a case of opening the leg up, cutting through the bone where the extra hoof is growing from, reshaping the cannon bone and stitching back up," said Duo.

"That's in theory," Hilde said. "There's a shit load of fine nerves and blood vessels in there."

"Why do you think I asked you to assist? With two of us working on her we should get the operation done a lot quicker and minimize shock."

"When are you operating?" Heero asked.

"Tomorrow afternoon." Duo switched the light board off.

"Can I help?"

Duo thought for a moment. "Actually, you could assist. I'm going to need someone to keep an eye on the anesthetic and machines while Hilde and I are operating. It would be easier to have someone do that for us than for us to keep stopping. It will also mean I can leave Catherine in the reception to take calls and delay evening consults if we haven't finished in time."

"Thanks. I'll let Treize know I want to leave a little earlier tomorrow."

"You sure you're not just looking for an excuse to get away from the pink parasite?" Hilde snickered.

Heero rolled his eyes. "She hasn't shown up yet, but I expect her to any day now. Treize said she's managing to get around on her crutches a bit better. If she can get someone to drive her over she will
"Want me to go around and let all the air out of her tires?"

"Hilde!"

"I could put tacks down if you'd prefer?"

"You're just as bad as Duo!"

"Nah, I'm better. But that's something you'll never get to confirm." Hilde gave the rider a wink and smirk before leaving the stables and going back to the surgery.

Heero could see Duo trying to hold his laughter. "Don't say a word," he growled and stalked off to get the lungeing gear for Shinigami.

***

Duo checked over the operating room once more, mentally ticking off everything in his head. The operating room was situated in the stable block and had been specifically designed for large animals. The walls were padded, as was the floor. The operating table was centrally located and stood upon a hydraulic platform. This enabled the table to be raised, lowered and pretty much put on any angle needed. It was a state of the art room and had cost Duo a small fortune; but he was proud of it.

With large animal surgery on the increase, facilities to enable the operations to take place were sorely needed. Duo had often found his operating theater being used by another vet for a large animal operation. He didn't mind, the other vets paid for the use of the facility and the income Duo had gained had almost paid for the initial cost of setting the room up.

Stepping out into the stable area, Duo smiled as Hilde walked past and into the scrub up area to get ready. Heero was already dressed in blue scrubs and in the stable with the filly, talking to her and keeping her calm. Duo looked over the stable door. "I need to give her a mild sedative now," He said and stepped inside.

The needle went into the vein without any fuss and Duo injected the sedative. Turning back to Heero, he gave his last instructions. "Give that about five minutes and then bring her out to the operating theater. I'm going to scrub up. Once she's inside I'll give her the full anesthetic."

"Okay." Heero patted the filly. "Can I steal a kiss before you go getting all dressed up?"

Duo smiled. "Of course." He moved close and allowed Hero to take his lips in a warm, affectionate kiss. "See you in the theater."

The filly started to sway a little, the drug making her a little groggy. Carefully, Heero led her out of the stable and to the theater where Hilde and Duo waited. The filly hesitated for a moment at the doorway, but the soothing words from Heero encouraged her to enter. Duo was in his surgical scrubs of green, green pants, green top, green hair cover and white, waterproof boots. Hilde was similarly attired. Surgical masks hung around their respective necks.

"Bring her over here, Heero. I need to have her side on. Once the anesthetic starts to work I'm going to have to push her slightly so she lies on the table. Once she's out I can maneuver the table into the position we will need." The table was lowered almost to ground level and on a slight angle in readiness for the patient.

Heero brought the filly around and held her steady in place. Duo slipped another needle into the vein
and slowly depressed the plunger. Anesthetic began to filter into the filly's blood stream and her knees started to buckle. Duo stopped injecting and between the three of them they guided the horse down to the operating table. Lying on her side, Duo continued to inject until he was sure the filly was unconscious, then he taped the needle into place for topping up the anesthetic, should the need arise.

"Right, oxygen mask, electrodes, clippers..." Duo barked out what he needed, time was the all important issue here. He didn't want to keep the filly under for any longer than he had to.

Heero slipped the oxygen mask over the filly's muzzle and adjusted the machine to Duo's specifications. Hilde grabbed the electrodes and placed them on the filly's body, checking the machine was working properly and recording the heart rate, breathing rate and temperature. Duo grabbed the clippers and began to clip away the hair from the operation site.

Hilde swabbed the area down with betadine and set a surgical cloth over the leg. Duo pulled the trolley of instruments towards them and lifted the tourniquet bandage from the tray. The bandage was secured, ensuring that the blood loss during the operation would be as minimal as possible.

"All set?" Duo asked as he looked at Heero who was positioned by the filly's head, eyes keeping watch on the machinery.

"Yes," Heero replied.

"All set here," Hilde stated and then raised her mask to cover her face.

"Then let's start." Duo pulled his mask up. "Scalpel."

* * *

Inserting the last stitch, Duo let the needle and scissors clatter into the kidney dish and stepped back. He rubbed his tired eyes and gazed down at the neat row of stitches, a smile gracing his lips as he pulled the mask down.

Hilde removed the tourniquet bandage and checked the filly's vitals. "All looks good," she said as she reached for another bandage and gauze to wrap the wound with.

"Right. Let's get her conscious again then." Duo removed the anesthetic needle and injected a painkiller and antibiotic. The mask and electrodes were taken off and the table lowered.

While they waited for the filly to come round, Hilde took the soiled instruments from the theater and into the small adjoining room to be cleaned. The filly started to wake, shaking her head and looking around groggily. Heero and Duo eased her from the operating table to the padded floor and gave her room to wake properly.

Hilde returned and watched as the filly slowly threw off the effects of the anesthetic and began to try and stand. After a few attempts, she managed and stood on wobbly legs, gazing around her.

"We will keep her in here for a little while longer, until she's stronger on those legs, then she can go back into the stable. Hilde? I'll need you to keep an eye on her for the next two hours. Check her vitals every half hour and once they have steadied she should be okay to leave for a while."

"Will do," replied Hilde.

"I'll take turns with you, Hilde," said Heero as he watched the filly sway slightly.
Duo picked up the piece of hoof they had removed and studied it. It was interesting and he was looking forward to going over it more thoroughly later, when he had the time. Duo's beeper went off and he jumped. He looked at the tiny screen and then walked over to the intercom system. Pressing the button he spoke. "You paged, Catherine?"

"There's someone to see you at the reception, Doctor Maxwell. He says he's a friend of yours and a colleague."

"Ah. Who is it?"

"A Doctor Zechs Merquise."

"Zechs!" Duo said with a grin. "Send him down to the stables, Catherine. We're finished here and just got the cleaning up to do."

"Okay. He's on his way."

"Thanks, Catherine." Duo released the button and turned to face Hilde and Heero. "I wonder what Zechs wants?"

~ * ~

tbc....

[1] As far as I know, this is true. I've spoken with some of Australia's International competitors and they have all stated how hard it is to get financial backing to take their horses overseas to qualify and compete in Olympic competition. The Aussie government and Institute of Sport contribute a lot to the financial side of the athletes representing the country at Olympic, Commonwealth and other major International sporting events. The equestrian teams, however, receive no financial support from the government. They have to find their own sponsorship or foot the financial bill themselves. Kinda sucks, don't it? Especially when the Aussie One Day Event teams have been so successful in winning gold at recent Olympic games.

Authors Note: I personally have not come across a horse born with five hooves. The condition of the horse and the operation performed in this chapter were taken from an episode of 'Harry's Practice' - a vet show here on Aussie TV and did occur. The foal was operated on successfully and now leads a normal life.
"Who is Zechs?" Hilde asked as she packed away the equipment from the operation.

"Zechs Merquise," Duo mused. "He's another vet, usually does locum work. When I was sick with the 'flu once, Heero called up the veterinary board to get a locum in for the practice. Zechs was the vet they sent out."

"Ah," replied Hilde.

"You'll like him, he's a cool guy. Good vet too. I wonder what he's doing down this neck of the woods?"

"I'm sure you'll find out shortly. Can I take Melody back to her stable now?" Heero interrupted.

Duo gave the filly a quick once over, she seemed a lot steadier on her feet now. "Yeah. I'll give you a hand with her."

They had just finished putting the yearling back into her box when Zechs appeared in the stable breezeway.

"Zechs!" Duo called out and then strode over to meet the tall man, offering his hand.

"Duo, it's good to see you again," the blonde replied.

"Good to see you too, Zechs," Duo said as he shook Zechs' hand. "You remember Heero?" Duo added as Heero stepped out of the filly's box and hung up the lead rope before walking over to shake the other vet's hand.

"It's been a while, Zechs. I trust life is treating you well?"

"It has been a while, Heero. Life is pretty good."

"This is Hilde, she's my assistant vet." Duo introduced the woman as Hilde emerged from the operating theater.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Doctor Merquise," Hilde said with a smile and shook hands.

"The pleasure is all mine, I assure you." Zechs gave the woman a dazzling smile. "Please, call me Zechs."

Hilde giggled then turned her attention back to Duo. "Everything is cleaned up in the theater, I've only got the instruments left to clean and sterilize. I'll take them up to the surgery and put them through the autoclave, then I'll come back down and keep an eye on Miss Muffet."

"Thanks, Hilde." Seeing Zechs quirk an eyebrow, Duo explained. "Had a yearling in with an extra hoof growing out from the cannon bone. We've just finished removing it."

"Ah. Sounds interesting. I've never seen anything like that before," Zechs said.

"I've got the extra 'appendage' in the prep room if you want to take a look at it?"
Heero cleared his throat. "I'll leave you guys to chat, I'm going to go do some work on Zero. I'll take over from Hilde once I've finished."

"Okay, Heero. We will be up at the house probably." Duo turned to Zechs. "You'll stay and have a coffee, won't you?"

"Thanks, I'd like that," replied Zechs.

***

After showing Zechs the hoof he'd removed from the youngster, Duo left Hilde to keep an eye on the filly and took Zechs up to the house where he made them both a coffee. Sitting down at the table, Duo opened the cookie tin and offered it to the other vet.

"What brings you back down this neck of the woods, Zechs?" The question had been burning on Duo's tongue since he'd taken the page from Catherine.

Zechs took a sip of his coffee and contemplated the question for a moment. "I've been asked to join the Oakford Equine Veterinary Clinic," he said quietly.

Duo gave a whistle. "Nice. I hope you said yes, and, if you don't mind me asking, how did you score that one?" Duo was familiar with the Oakford clinic, it was the equine specialist in the surrounding districts. He also recalled it was the practice that the pink parasite used.

"They called me up and asked me to do some locum work for them a couple of months back. I did and thoroughly enjoyed it. They gave me another call last week and offered me a position at the practice. They already have two vets working there, but the clientele is growing and they could really use another vet. So they offered me the position. I'm getting a little tired with all the traveling around involved in being a locum so I took it."


"Thank you. I thought I would call by and let you know I'll be moving down this way. I really enjoyed the week I spent here at your practice and with us going to be neighbors of sorts I had hoped we could continue our friendship as well."

"Of course," Duo grinned.

They chatted for a while longer, Heero finished up with Zero and joined them, chatting easily to Zechs while Duo went to check on the filly. Heero was pleased to hear Zechs' news and congratulated the blonde. During the short time Zechs had spent at the Maxwell Veterinary practice, Heero had gotten to know the vet quite well and a friendship had been forged. Knowing that Zechs would be permanently in the next county made him happy that their friendship would continue.

Duo had told Zechs about Heero's qualifying and making the short list for the Nations Cup, something that caused Heero to blush and Zechs to offer hearty congratulations. They chatted for a while longer before Duo had to bid his farewells as evening consults were due to start. Zechs took his leave, promising to stay in touch and let the guys know his new phone number and address - when he had one.

Duo went off to the surgery, Heero set about bringing the horses in and then making dinner, both their minds slightly preoccupied with Zechs' visit.
Another week went by, Melody recovered well from her surgery and Duo was pleased with the result. He called Mr Styles who came and collected the filly two days after the operation. The older man could hardly believe his eyes when he saw the filly, the ugly growth having been removed and the only visible evidence of anything having been on her leg was the row of neat stitches. Duo gave Mr Styles the run down on care of the wound and advised him to bring the filly back in another eight days to have the stitches removed.

Heero managed to enjoy a few more days Relena free and concentrate on working Sandrock and Taurus. Sandy was working well; he'd muscled up nicely and taken out a few larger events. Currently he was graded in B grade and Heero didn't think it would be too much longer before the horse made it to A grade. Ideally he'd like to keep Sandy at B grade for the rest of the season, give the horse a chance to gain more experience before passing into the top grade. If he could finish the season in B grade then when the next season began, Heero could start Sandy off in C grade, the EFA ruling allowing a combination to commence a new season at a grade lower than the one they finished in, in the previous season.

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Taurus was settling well too. The continuous work over poles and grids had done wonders for the excitable animal. They were now jumping courses again, this time though, Taurus was keeping his attention focused on his rider and actually listening instead of trying to charge off into his fences. Heero was pleased with the progress and had high hopes that the horse would make it through the ranks and become a good A grade animal.

Treize was also thinking along the same lines. While Taurus would never make it to International competition, Treize could see that he should be able to sell the horse for a decent price at some stage during the next showjumping season. Sandrock was also destined to be sold, neither horse having that vital 'spark' that was necessary to take it to the top. They were good horses, no doubt about that and would continue to do well in open competition, but Treize had other horses coming into the stable for next season and so the current animals had to be looked at and their fates decided.

Treize had already picked out a four year old for Heero to start on next season; a handsome, brown stallion called Altron. The horse had shown a lot of talent when Treize had started to break him in and Treize had high hopes that Heero would be able to take that talent and turn the horse into a top animal.

Riding back into the stable area on Sandrock, Heero's attention was taken by a strange car he could see parked just outside the stable area. Beside Heero, Treize brought Goose to a halt and noticed the younger rider's attention focusing on something he couldn't see.

"What's up?" Treize asked as he dismounted.

"Strange car parked just outside," replied Heero as he also dismounted.

A stable boy took Goose's reins as Treize went to have a look. He returned a moment later. "You want to start running now?"

"Huh?"

"It's Relena."

Heero did his best not to show the grimace, but failed. Moments later his worst nightmare appeared around the corner.
"Heero, Treize," the woman said excitedly as she was carried from the car and into the stable courtyard.

"Relena," murmured Heero and ducked behind Sandy to run his stirrups up.

"Ah, Relena. Good to see you again, my dear, but shouldn't you be resting? This moving around can't be aiding the healing of your foot," said Treize.

"Don't you start fussing," grumbled Relena. "I'm fine but if I have to spend another minute in that house I'm going to go mad."

"Here," Treize disappeared into the tack room and emerged with a chair. "Sit on that."

Relena did so, the man that had carried her from the car returned with her crutches and propped them against the stable wall. "Thank you, James," Relena said to the young man who was obviously a groom if his dress was anything to go by.

Heero told the young groom who came over to take care of Sandrock that he would see to the animal. Heero knew that if he left the care of the horse to the groom he would be left with no choice but to talk to Relena, and he really didn't want to do that. Having the horse to tend to gave him an excuse to chat from a distance. He knew it was the coward’s way out and Duo would probably laugh at his antics when he told him later, but right now, Heero didn't care.

Despite the fact that she was chair bound for the moment, Relena didn't give up on her pursuit of the dark haired rider. She chatted politely to Treize, but still managed to let Heero know she wanted him.

After several minutes and lots of subtle hints from Relena to try to get Heero to ask her out, Heero had finished untacking the bay. He couldn't use the horse as an excuse anymore and reluctantly handed Sandy over to the groom to be put back in his stable.

"How is your foot, Relena?" Heero asked, remembering his manners.

"It's coming along okay. It aches from time to time, but I guess that's to be expected," she replied and shifted her foot to show off the cumbersome cast.

"I'm really sorry about Zero stepping on you," Heero apologized. He'd already said numerous apologies when the accident had happened, but at the time Relena was too upset and in pain to really take much notice. Heero did feel bad about Zero stepping on her and it was the right thing to do to offer his apologies again.

"It was an accident, Heero. I know the horse didn't do it on purpose," Relena replied.

Heero still had his doubts about that. Given the way Duo had stuffed Zero full of carrots afterwards and praised the horse for his well timed step, Heero wondered if Zero was going to make a habit of stepping on anything pink with a monotonous voice.

"If it will make you feel any better you can take me out to dinner."

Heero's head jerked around with those words. "What?!"

"I know a nice restaurant in town that serves a good meal. Not too expensive and cozy as well."

"Ah."

"I'll make a reservation for tomorrow at seven thirty. You can pick me up at seven."
"I can't."

"Pardon?"

"Relena, I can't. I have work to do at the vet practice."

"Oh, posh! That Maxwell creature doesn't need you to help him, he has staff."

"Yes, he does have staff and I'm part of the payroll too. I can't just take time off when I feel like it." Heero was beginning to get desperate. He really didn't want to go out with this woman and longed to be able to tell her that he already had a boyfriend. Unfortunately, he couldn't reveal the real reason for his lack of interest in her.

"I'll call him and tell him you won't be working tomorrow. That will give him enough time to arrange a replacement for you."

Was there no end to this woman's gall? Lucky for Heero, Treize stepped in.

"Heero, you need to get Taurus saddled up, we have a lesson in the jumping paddock in about fifteen minutes."

"Right." Heero gave the older man a smile of gratitude and went to fetch the hot headed chestnut.

"Relena, I think you should stop badgering Heero," Treize said as the young man went to fetch the horse.

"Why? He's cute, handsome and got a great body on him. I think we would make a perfect pair. Mrs. Relena Yuy. That has a nice ring to it don't you think, Treize?"

Treize almost choked, but skillfully turned it into a cough. "Getting a bit ahead of yourself, aren't you?"

"Why waste time?"

"Relena, as much as you persist in this infatuation of yours, have you stopped to consider Heero's side?"

"Pardon?"

"Heero is a young man with a bright future. He's got skills and a natural talent with horses, a talent I am determined to see nurtured and taken to its full potential. Heero doesn't have time in his life to get married, that's presuming he even wanted to. He's far too busy with his career."

"I can help him with that career, Treize. You know the sort of stock I breed, heaven knows you've ridden enough of them. With Heero marrying me we can both benefit. I'd be able to provide him with the quality animal to take him to the top."

Treize gave a heavy sigh. It appeared Relena had an answer to everything. "Has it ever occurred to you that Heero isn't interested in you?"

"Why wouldn't he be? I'm pretty, astute in business and have a sound wealth behind me."

"And you're also female," Treize muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"
"Ah, I said, have you considered that he might already be involved in a relationship?" Treize didn't want to give anything away, but was determined to try and help Heero out if he could.

"He's not."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I already asked him if he had a wife or girlfriend and he said he wasn't married and didn't have a girlfriend," replied Relena smugly.

Well, he couldn't exactly come out and say he had a boyfriend, Treize thought. "Relena, give him some space, please? He has a lot to concentrate on, not only with Taurus and Sandy, but his own horse as well. It's not going to be easy to make the final team for the cup."

Relena sighed. "I'm not going to give up," she warned.

"I didn't expect you would."

"Besides, he's already agreed to take me out to dinner tomorrow."

"I don't recall him saying he would. Actually, if I remember correctly he said he couldn't because he had to work at the vet practice."

"I know what he said, but I'll call that cat and dog vet and let him know my Heero is taking me out for dinner and he can arrange someone else to fill in. I'm doubtful that they even need Heero. It's only a small practice, not important."

Treize was just about ready to strangle the woman, only his sense of etiquette kept him from saying and doing what he really wanted to. Lucky for Relena she was a woman, if she'd been a man Treize was sure he would have decked her by now.

Heero returned at that moment with Taurus and began to get the chestnut ready.

"I'll head down to the paddock and set up the grid," said Treize. "Once you're saddled, join me and we will give this animal a good workout."

"Can I come and watch?" Relena asked.

Treize looked at Heero.

Heero grunted. "It's okay with me."

"All right, you can come and watch. I'll carry you down there, but I warn you. You will have to stay in your seat and no interrupting while I'm working with Heero and Taurus."

"Thank you. I'll be good."

Treize doubted that but didn't say anything. He walked over and picked up the woman, calling for a stable boy to bring the woman's chair and crutches. Heero was left in peace to finish saddling up.

When they got to the paddock, Treize had the stable boy set up the chair by the fence, far enough away that Relena wouldn't be in any danger or restrict the working of the horse, but still close enough to watch what went on. With Relena ensconced in the chair, Treize went to set up the grid.

* * *
Heero finished saddling up and walked Taurus to the jumping paddock. He spotted Relena sitting by the fence and hoped that the woman would remain there and not interfere with his lesson. Taurus was starting to show something of the form he was capable of and Heero didn't want anything to disturb that. He took the gelding to a corner of the paddock and began to warm up while Treize finished setting up the grid.

Once Taurus was loosened up, Heero brought him over to the grid and Treize. "We will start him off over the grid at two foot, just bring him in at a trot and let him settle," said Treize.

Heero nodded and turned the horse, riding in a circle and establishing the trot rhythm before turning the horse to face the grid. Taurus lowered his head and neck, brought his hind quarters underneath him and trotted down the line of small jumps effortlessly. Heero patted the chestnut neck and brought him around for another go.

The grid was repeated several times, Taurus listening and responding well. Treize then raised the fences to three foot and asked Heero to push into the canter and continue with the grid as before. Heero sat down in his saddle, collected his reins and urged the horse into the canter. Taurus responded well, changing his gait and settling into a steady canter.

Approaching the grid again, Heero held the horse until the last three strides then urged him forward. Taurus responded, back legs coming underneath as his head lowered and his back rounded. The grid was taken in good style, Taurus keeping the cadence throughout, striding each fence to perfection and clearing the jumps easily.

"That's much better," praised Treize as Heero gave the horse a breather.

"He's certainly improving," replied Heero. "If he keeps going this way then there's no reason why he shouldn't be able to compete again next season."

"I agree. The true test though will be when he gets onto a show ground again. It will be interesting to see his reaction, whether it brings back memories to him of his last encounter."

"Yeah. I guess all we can do is hope."

"Right. Okay, you've had a long enough break, let's take him down the bottom of the paddock and try him over a proper course."

"No problem." Heero applied a gentle pressure with his legs and Taurus began to move. Treize walked along beside, heading for the jumping course at the bottom of the paddock. Both men completely forgot about Relena.

Sitting in her chair, Relena watched the big chestnut as he worked, the long stride and ease in which he jumped the grid bringing a smile to her face. She could really appreciate Heero's riding skills and found her eyes lingering over his body. The loose shirt he wore enhanced his rugged looks and those tight jodhpurs... Well, suffice to say Relena had to look; and had licked her lips on several occasions. She wasn't all that clued up on the male form but she knew enough to realize that Heero did indeed have a very nice package if his jodhpurs were anything to go by.

Seeing the two men and horse walking off down the paddock she wondered where they were going. Then the wonder turned to annoyance as she realized they'd forgotten about her. She sat back and wondered what to do.

Reaching the other end of the paddock, Treize explained to Heero what he wanted him to do with Taurus. "Take him around the outside of the course, get him going forwards and then bring him in to
start. The order I want you to jump them in will be crossbar, parallel bars, upright, oxer, gate, double, wall and the triple. They’re set at three foot and that should do him for the first round. Depending on how he goes, we can put him over a second time and then I'll raise them to three foot six and add the stile to the course."

"Okay," replied Heero and gathered up his reins. He took Taurus around the outside of the jumps, increasing the horse's gait until he had a forward going canter. Sitting into his saddle, Heero turned the chestnut and began the course.

Taurus pricked his ears as he approached the first fence. He listened to his rider and cleared it easily, turning slightly to the left to come into the second fence.

Treize watched carefully, noting Heero's riding and how the horse was traveling. A smile crossed his features as he watched the pair. Taurus seemed to be a different horse, listening and responding to Heero's signals. The pair came into the double and Treize held his breath. They cleared the first element, landed, took a stride and were sailing over the second element. Treize released the breath with a sigh of relief. If they were going to have any trouble on the practice course the double would be it.

Taurus cleared the rest of the course with ease, only pulling a little towards the end, but nothing that Heero couldn't handle. With a wide grin on his face, Heero turned the animal and rode over to Treize to see what the other man thought.

They discussed the horse's performance for a couple of minutes before Heero took the chestnut round again. Taurus once more completed the course with ease, earning himself a few pats and lots of verbal praise. Heero walked the horse around so he wouldn't go cold while Treize raised the course.

"Right, it's set at three six now. Do the stile in-between the wall and the triple," Treize said as he returned from adjusting the course.

"Will do," replied Heero and turned Taurus to circle and build up speed before attempting the course.

Relena sat fuming. She was madder than a hornet that she'd been forgotten. She watched as Heero took the big chestnut over the jumps, annoyed that she couldn't see or hear properly what was going on. Deciding that she'd had enough of sitting there, Relena grabbed her crutches, propped them under her arms and began to stand. Once she was upright, she shuffled the crutches until they were in a more comfortable position and then began the trek across the paddock to where the two men were working with the horse.

Heero was concentrating hard. Although the course remained the same, other than the addition of the stile, the height had been increased and that added a whole new dimension to his jumping tactics. He needed to have Taurus on the bit, listening and responding to every touch, every signal he gave the horse. So far, Taurus was responding well, shortening and lengthening his stride as Heero asked.

Treize watched carefully. He was pleased with the way the chestnut was going. He'd had his doubts that the horse would be able to cope with the raised fences, but it seemed he was wrong.

The two men and horse were so intent on what they were doing that none of them saw Relena get up and start to walk across the paddock on her crutches.

Clearing the wall, Heero sat down in his saddle and rode Taurus together. The stile was a tricky jump. It was narrow which made it awkward for the horse to judge its height and the take off point. With a light hand on the reins, Heero brought the chestnut's hind legs underneath him, held the
power there until the last second then unleashed it. Taurus pushed himself off the ground with an explosion of strength. He sailed over the stile, landed and immediately felt his rider's legs on his sides, pushing him back together.

They made the turn and lined up the triple, Heero adjusting Taurus' stride so the horse met the obstacle perfectly. They launched into the air, clearing the poles with style and ease, landing safely on the other side. Heero sat down again into his saddle and began to bring the horse to a trot.

Treize grinned. That had been an excellent effort. He was really pleased with the way the pair had gone and was happy that Heero had talked him into giving the horse a second chance. If Taurus kept going like this then Treize would be able to sell him at a tidy profit for both himself and Relena.

Relena.

Guiltily, Treize began to turn around. He'd forgotten all about Relena. No doubt she would be fuming by now. As Treize turned he spotted the woman coming across the paddock towards them. She wasn't all that far away now and Treize could see the anger in her face.

Taurus also spotted the funny creature coming across the paddock and he stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes boggled, never had he ever seen anything like this. His nostrils flared and he gave a loud snort.

Heero ran a soothing hand down the horse's neck. "It's okay, Taurus, it's just Relena, nothing to be scared of. Unless you happen to be me that is."

Hearing the snort, Treize spun around to see the chestnut standing stock still, his eyes wide and his nostrils flaring. He watched as Taurus shook his head, snorted again and then spun around before facing Relena again and snorting once more.

The spin caught Heero by surprise and he lost a stirrup. He managed to stay on the horse though and continued to try and soothe the animal.

Seeing what could happen, Treize shouted for Relena to stop. Relena didn't hear him though. She was thoroughly fed up at being forgotten, her mind only focused on her own plight and she continued to limp across the paddock, intent on giving the two a piece of her mind.

"It's okay, boy," Heero said softly, reassuring the horse. Beneath him, Taurus trembled, the muscles shaking, head nodding up and down as his eyes remained fixed on the creature approaching.

Treize tried again to call out to Relena. He could see Taurus getting more and more agitated. With Relena either ignoring him or not hearing his call, Treize began to walk towards her.

Finally, Taurus couldn't take anymore. The thing walking towards him wasn't recognizable as anything he trusted. His instincts kicked in and took over. Obeying those instincts that had kept the horse alive for centuries, Taurus gave one last snort, spun around and bolted.

Several things happened at once. Treize would think back later and comment that it was as if everything went into slow motion.

Hearing the snort and then the sound of galloping hooves, Treize stopped and turned. Taurus was bolting. Relena also stopped when she heard the sound of the hooves and stared in open mouthed horror as Taurus bolted, heading straight for the paddock gate.

"Oh fuck!" exclaimed Treize before his mouth went dry.
"Treize? What the hell is happening?" Relena said, her face worried.

"Taurus has bolted. I hope Heero can turn him or stop him." Treize gave a worried look to the woman now beside him.

"Can he clear the gate?" Relena asked, her voice shaking a little.

"I don't know. It's five foot."

"Oh."

"But that's not the problem. There's only a two foot strip of grass on the other side; then it's the blue metal laneway." [1]

"Oh god."

"Heero! Look out!" yelled Treize. But it was fruitless.

* * *

Heero hadn't regained his stirrup from Taurus' earlier spin so when the horse jumped and spun again, he was thrown slightly off balance. He managed to shove himself back in the saddle though and gather up the reins he'd lost when the horse had turned.

"Whoa, steady, Taurus. No need to panic, boy. She's not a predator," Heero said as the horse bolted. Taurus didn't listen. He was thoroughly worked up and frightened by now and intended to put as much distance between himself and the threat as possible. Blindly, he galloped on.

Heero tugged on the reins, pulling desperately, but it was as if the horse's mouth had turned to steel. He tried pulling on one rein with all his strength, but Taurus galloped on. The wind roared past his ears, the force of it causing tears to form in his eyes as he tried again and again to stop the chestnut's mad flight.

The words Treize yelled out were snatched away by the rushing wind, but Heero caught the 'out' bit. He switched his attention to where Taurus was heading and swallowed hard. Approaching at a fearful speed was the paddock gate. It was five foot high - and closed.

There was no way that Taurus would be able to clear it at the speed he was traveling. Heero tried again to turn the animal or check the speed. Taurus didn't respond. Taurus was determined to jump and get away from the thing that had scared him. For the first time in his riding career, Heero understood the term 'being a passenger'. There was absolutely nothing he could do to stop the animal.

With that knowledge hitting him, Heero knew all he could do was hang on and try to give the gelding as much assistance as he could. Setting his mouth in a grim line, Heero dug his knees in hard, took a firm hold of the reins and grabbed a handful of mane.

The sight of the approaching gate suddenly registered in Taurus' fear filled mind. His stride faltered for a moment, but he was too close to change tack now. If he tried to turn he would fall. There wasn't enough space for him to stop either; he would surely slide into the gate. Gathering his hindquarters underneath him, Taurus gave the leap of his life.

Heero flung himself forward in an effort to stay with the chestnut. He felt the power underneath him as Taurus lurched into the air. For a brief second, Heero thought they were going to make it, then he
heard the distinct sound of splintering wood.

Taurus' hind legs caught the gate, hitting it hard, breaking the top two spars and throwing the horse off balance in mid air. Forelegs stretched out, caught the edge of the grass and slid onto the blue metal, buckling beneath the weight of the animal's body. The head folded under, muzzle hitting the dirt followed by the shoulders as Taurus somersaulted.

Heero knew they were going to fall as soon as he heard the wood splinter. As Taurus hit the ground and folded underneath him, Heero did his best to relax and tuck his head in. The force of the fall threw Heero from the saddle and across the blue metal roadway, he hit the road, bounced and then crashed against a tree on the other side.

There was a sickening crunch, a sharp pain and then Heero's world went black.

~ * ~

tbc...

[1] Blue Metal: This is a road base used quite a lot here in Aussie as opposed to asphalt in country areas or areas that don't get a lot of traffic. It's also used a lot in landscape gardening for drainage purposes. It's a fine to coarse stone, hardy and colored a blue gray - hence the name blue metal. For more info go here: http://www.anlscape.com.au/page/blue_metal.html
Chapter 22

AN: Warning Major Angst ahead... author recommends having a box of tissues handy...

Chapter 22

Treize watched in horror as Taurus attempted to clear the gate, he saw the hind legs catch and break through the top two spars, the animal being thrown off balance. As Taurus landed on the other side, Treize watched, helpless as the horse fell and disappeared from sight.

Relena watched the drama unfold, her eyes wide, skin paling when the chestnut crashed through the top of the gate. Seeing the horse crumple and Heero go flying through the air, she screamed.

Treize was running before he was aware of his legs moving. Oh God, oh God. Please let them be all right, he thought desperately as he pushed his legs as fast as they could carry him. As he reached the broken gate his blood ran cold. Heero lay crumpled against the tree trunk, unmoving. Taurus was attempting to get to his feet.

With a dry mouth, Treize grabbed his cell phone from his pocket and called 000 [1].

"This is emergency. Fire, police or ambulance?"

"Ambulance."

"Ambulance. What is the nature of the emergency?"

"This is Treize Khushrenada. I need an ambulance, one of my riders has fallen from his horse."

The ambulance dispatch took all the details Treize could supply and reassured him that an ambulance had been sent and would be there as soon as possible.

Treize disconnected and redialed, this time he called the stables.

"Otto. Quick, there's been an accident. I'm in the lane at the back of the jumping paddock. I need you to bring a blanket, Taurus' rug and halter. Hurry."

While he'd been making the calls, Treize had moved to where Heero lay. Pocketing the cell phone, Treize checked Heero's neck and was relieved to find a pulse. Heero was out cold and Treize didn't dare move him, he hadn't a clue as to what injuries Heero may have sustained and moving him may aggravate any injury. He did undo the chin strap to Heero's helmet, but left the helmet in place.

"Oh God."

Hearing the softly spoken words, Treize turned to see that Relena had managed to get across the paddock. She was staring at Taurus and looked like she was about to pass out. Treize turned to look at the horse properly for the first time. He swallowed hard and forced the bile back down.

"Relena!" he said sharply, drawing the woman's attention back to him. "I need you to sit here with Heero and keep an eye on him. Otto is on his way and so is the ambulance."

Numbly, Relena nodded and shuffled over to where Heero lay. "He's..."

"He's okay, Relena, just unconscious. Don't try to move him, just sit there next to him and watch him for me. I have to go see to Taurus. If Heero comes around, tell him not to move and let me know."
"Okay." Tears were filling Relena's eyes, but she obediently sat on the grass next to Heero and kept her eyes on him.

Treize turned his attention back to Taurus. The chestnut had managed to get back to his feet and now stood in the middle of the road, head hanging, sides heaving and eyes glazed with pain and shock.

"Easy, boy," Treize soothed as he approached the injured horse. Keeping up a low murmur, Treize ran his eyes over the animal, assessing the damage. Once more he had to fight to keep his stomach's contents. Blood ran freely from several wounds on the horse's legs, shoulders and head. Taurus' muzzle was crushed in, blood dripping from the nostrils. The blood wasn't what made Treize feel queasy though. The horse's left foreleg was hanging uselessly from the forearm, twisted at a horrible angle. The glint of bone could be seen through the mangled flesh.

"Oh, Taurus," Treize said softly as he managed to get beside the chestnut. He ran a gentle hand along the horse's neck, speaking softly and trying to stop his voice from choking.

Taurus tried to give a nudge and whinny, but ended up lurching to the side, blood splattering everywhere as he snorted and coughed.

"Steady, whoa. Stand, boy," Treize said and tried desperately to stop the animal from moving and aggravating his injuries. He could hear the sound of the stable land rover approaching and prayed that the ambulance wouldn't be long.

Otto could see the group up ahead and slowed the vehicle. He brought the land rover to a halt and climbed out, motioning for Henry, one of the stable boys he'd brought with him, to grab the items in the back. Quickly, Otto sized up the situation, noted that Heero was out cold, Relena sitting with him and Treize trying to soothe an obviously distressed and injured Taurus.

Henry appeared beside him and Otto took the rug and halter, telling Henry to cover Heero with the blanket and then come and assist him with the horse.

"You okay, boss?" Otto asked as he took charge of the terrified animal.

Treize shook his head. "No, I'm not, Otto. Thank you for getting here so quickly though."

Otto gave a grim nod and turned his attention to the frightened horse. "Fucking hell," he ground out as he took in the extent of the damage.

Henry walked over to them. "I've put the blanket over Heero... Oh shit!" Henry quickly turned away and sprinted for the road side where he proceeded to empty his stomach.

In the distance the sound of sirens could be heard. Treize gave a sigh of relief. It felt like hours had passed when a glance at his watch told him only eight minutes had elapsed.

"Boss?"

Treize turned back to Otto. "Yes?"

"I hate to say this, but I don't think there's any hope for Taurus."

Lowering his head, Treize took a deep breath. "That's what I thought."

"Have you called the vet? Or would you prefer me to?"

Duo.
With all the happenings, Treize had completely forgotten about calling Duo. "Fuck! I've got to call Duo," Treize said and reached for his cell phone again. Quickly he punched in the number and waited while the call connected.

"Maxwell Veterinary Practice."

"I need to speak to Doctor Maxwell immediately. This is an emergency."

"May I ask who is calling and the nature of the emergency?"

"It's Treize, Treize Kushrenada. There's been an accident at the stables; Heero and Taurus have taken a fall."

"Is Heero okay?" the woman interrupted, her voice full of concern.

"He's out cold. Look, I really need to speak to Duo."

"Putting you through now."

Seconds later, Treize had been transferred and Duo's voice came down the line.

"Treize? What's happening? Catherine said there'd been a fall," Duo couldn't keep the panic from rising in his voice.

"Duo, calm down. Taurus bolted, he…he tried to jump the paddock gate and fell. Heero was thrown clear, but he's unconscious. I don't know what injuries he has, but the ambulance is almost here."

"I'm on my way," Duo interrupted.

"We're in the lane at the back of the jumping paddock."

"Right."

The line went dead. Treize looked at the silent cell phone for a moment and then ran a hand though his hair. The sound of the ambulance siren was drawing closer. "Henry, go to the end of the lane and wait for the ambulance. Point them in this direction," Treize barked at the green looking stable hand.

Henry nodded and took off at a run. He really didn't want to stay around the accident site if he could help it. He loved horses, enjoyed working with them, but to see the damage to the chestnut. Henry shuddered. Best not to think about that, lest he start heaving again.

Treize dialed another number and waited patiently for the call to connect. Out the corner of his eye he watched Otto doing his best to keep Taurus calm and prevent any further pain or injury. Heero still lay at the base of the tree unmoving, Relena by his side sniffing softly. Treize was beginning to think he was in the middle of a nightmare.

"Oakford Equine Hospital. How can I help you?"

"This is Treize Khushrenada from the Khushrenada Showjumping stable. There's been an accident, I need a vet immediately."

"One moment, Mr Khushrenada."

Soft music came down the line for a few seconds before a male voice replaced it.

"This is Doctor Zechs Merquise. I believe you need assistance?"
"Yes. One of my pupils and a horse have had a jumping accident. The horse bolted and tried to jump the paddock gate. He didn't make it."

"I see. Is it possible for you to give me an indication of the extent of the horse's injuries? It's so I know what equipment to bring with me."

"I think all you will need is the humane killer." Treize couldn't help the choke in his voice as he spoke.

"Ah. Where exactly is the horse?"

Treize gave the address and directions to the lane. "Please hurry. Taurus... He's not in a good way and I don't want him to suffer..." Treize trailed off, he didn't trust himself to speak any more.

"I'll be there as quickly as I can. Is the rider all right?"

"Heero took a pretty bad fall and is unconscious. Ambulance is here now."

"Heero? Is that, Heero Yuy?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Yes, yes, I do. Heero and Duo Maxwell are friends of mine. Look, I'm on my way, I should be there within fifteen minutes."

"Thank you." Treize closed the cell phone and turned briefly to Otto. "Vet's on his way."

"Good," Otto ran a soothing hand along Taurus' neck. "It's all right, boy. You'll be out of your pain soon." Tears glistened in the older groom's eyes as he gently pulled the chestnut's ears.

***

Duo grabbed his keys and jacket, shoving his feet into his sneakers all at the same time. He tore out of the house and sprinted to the surgery. Catherine met him halfway.

"Is Heero okay?" the receptionist asked.

"I don't know, Catherine. Treize said he wasn't sure of what injuries Heero may have. All he said was Heero was unconscious and the ambulance was on its way."

"Go, Duo. I'll take care of things here until you get back."

"Thanks." Duo's mind was racing with thoughts of Heero and how badly his lover could be hurt. He wasn't thinking straight, the practice, clients, horses all swimming around in his head and he was unable to think what to do.

"Don't worry about anything here. I'll sort it all out and look after everything. You go to Heero, he needs you. Please, Duo."

Duo nodded and turned. "I'll call and let you know what's happening."

"I'll be here."

With his heart in his throat and fear in his gut, Duo raced back down the path, passed the house and jumped into his car. Yanking his seatbelt on, he started the vehicle and jerked the shift into 'drive'. The car tore along the driveway and out onto the road. Duo pushed the vehicle as fast as he dared,
Catherine watched the distraught vet leave, her own heart heavy with sadness. She hoped and prayed that Heero was going to be okay. Pushing the thoughts to the back of her mind for the moment, Catherine drew on her inner strength. There were things to be done, she reminded herself and quickly returned to the office inside the surgery. Sitting down, she called Hilde first, briefly letting the female vet know what had happened. "I know it's your day off, Hilde, but would you mind -"

"I'll be there shortly," Hilde said, cutting Catherine off. "You can give me the rest of the details once I'm there."

"Thank you, Hilde." Catherine hung up and thought about the situation for a moment. Evening consults were taken care of now that Hilde was coming in and she could see to the couple of animals that were currently in the kennels.

The horses.

What about Zero, Scythe and Shini? While Catherine was confident in her handling of animals, she hadn't had a great deal to do with horses, and even less with the ones on the property. She didn't have a clue regarding their feeding, bringing them in or putting rugs on. Reaching for the 'phone again, she dialed a well known number.

"Barton Animal Refuge."

The sound of her brother's calm voice down the line soothed Catherine's troubled mind. Trowa could help, she knew he would.

Trowa listened as Catherine broke the news, his heart plummeted and his mouth went dry as she told him all she knew.

"Duo has gone to be with Heero, I've got Hilde coming in to cover the consults and I can look after the animals in the kennels, but... Trowa? The horses. I don't know what to do about them."

"Leave them be, Cathy. I'll finish up what I have to do here and then I'll be over. Quatre can come with me and we will look after the horses."

"Thanks, Trowa." Catherine heaved a sigh of relief.

"I'll be there as soon as I can. You have my cell number, call me as soon as you know anything."

"I will. Oh Trowa..."

"Heero will be okay, Cathy."

"You don't know that."

"Trust me. He's a tough guy. He has to be okay." Trowa didn't add that it would shatter Duo's world if Heero wasn't.

"I'll see you soon then."

"Be there shortly, Cathy." Trowa disconnected the call.

Catherine held the receiver for a moment and then placed it back in the cradle. With a deep sigh, she turned to the paper work that awaited.
Henry showed the ambulance officers where to go and then followed behind the gleaming white vehicle. The officers drove slowly along the narrow lane; up ahead they could see a small gathering of people and a horse. They pulled up a little way from the group, having turned off their lights and sirens once they'd reached the lane.

The ambulance men got out, going to the back of the vehicle and opening the doors. One climbed in and grabbed a bag of equipment that he passed to the other officer before grabbing another bag and joining his colleague. They jogged towards the group, slowing to walk when they saw the horse getting upset by their approach.

"Where is the patient?" one officer asked.

Treize left Otto in charge of Taurus and strode towards the ambulance men. "He's over here."

"What happened?" asked the other officer as they dropped their bags on the ground, the one officer questioning Treize while the other began to check Heero.

"We were doing some jumping training with the horse. He'd been going well so we'd decided to call it a day. Then the horse got a fright and bolted. Heero couldn't stop him, they went straight for the gate over there." Treize pointed to the broken gate. "He didn't clear it, caught his hind legs on the top and when he landed, he just… fell. Heero must have gone over his shoulder and ended up against the tree here."

"Right."

"I haven't moved him at all, I've only undone the chin strap to his helmet."

"Has he come around at all?" the officer whose name badge read 'Paul Simons' asked as he pulled Heero's eyelids up and flashed a pen light into them, noting the pupils' reaction.

"No. He's been out since he fell."

"Okay. Excuse me, Miss? Could you move over that way a bit? We need room to work here," the other ambulance officer whose name badge said 'John Dalton' asked Relena.

"Sorry." Relena shuffled to the side to give the men room to work.

The two ambulance officers worked quietly and efficiently, talking in low tones to each other as they carefully assessed Heero's unconscious form. They checked blood pressure, temperature, reaction to light and stimuli. Skilled hands explored Heero's legs and then gently straightened them. Abdomen, ribs and torso were similarly examined before the officers moved to Heero's arms, shoulders and neck.

The helmet was carefully removed and a neck brace fitted. Treize could see the darkening purple of a large bruise appearing over Heero's right temple. Simons went back to the rig and fetched the gurney, while Dalton straightened up and addressed Treize.

"From what I can tell he appears to have a broken upper right arm and dislocated collar bone. I don't think there are any internal injuries or any damage to his legs. The bruise on his head is of concern, but until a doctor has a look at him there is no way to be certain of what damage has been done. We're going to put a drip line in and then transport him through to Salsbury Memorial Hospital for assessment. I'm going to need a contact number of his next of kin."
"I'm not sure who his next of kin is," replied Treize. "I have it back up at the house on the employment forms though. Can I call it through to the hospital emergency section?"

"That will be fine. If he comes around in the interim we can always ask him," replied Dalton.

"Okay. I have to wait for the vet who's on his way to treat the horse, as soon as I'm finished with that I'll get the paperwork out and ring the hospital."

"Thank you." Dalton turned back to give his partner a hand with setting up the drip and then they carefully lifted Heero onto the gurney. Dalton turned to Treize. "I don't suppose there's any chance of anyone coming with us?"

"I've called his -" Treize paused for a moment and chose his words carefully. "I've phoned his house mate, he's on his way now. I don't think he's going to get here within the next five minutes though."

"I'll go."

Treize turned, along with the ambulance officers to see Relena struggling to her feet.

"Relena, I don't think," began Treize.

"Nonsense. Heero needs someone familiar with him if he comes around. You can't go because of Taurus. That long haired thing won't be here for ages so it makes sense for me to go. Besides, Heero and I are practically engaged, it's only right I should be the one to go with him."

The ambulance officer called Simons quirked an eyebrow.

"I wish you would stop with this delusion of yours, Relena," Treize all but snapped. He really didn't have the patience right now to deal with the woman, but he couldn't betray Heero either. It was a catch 22 situation.

"Look, I don't know what is going on here and to be frank, I don't care either," began Dalton. "My first priority is to my patient and that's what I'm intent on doing. I need a familiar face for the patient as well as someone who can provide information on the patient to accompany us to the hospital. Until you can supply me with the contact details of the next of kin or you can come along yourself, I have no choice but to take this woman with me."

Relena gave a small smile. "I'll be happy to come with you and answer any questions relating to Heero that I can."

There wasn't anything Treize could do. Torn between keeping his friend's secret, remaining with his horse or heading to the hospital himself, Treize didn't have a say in the matter. "Fine. Go with him, Relena, but as soon as Doctor Maxwell gets there I'd make myself scarce if I were you."

Resisting the urge to scowl at the mention of the vet's name, Relena grabbed her crutches and hobbled behind the ambulance officers and gurney. Fortunately the ambulance was on the far side from Taurus and with the animal in pain and shock he didn't see Relena hobbling along.

The ambulance officers loaded Heero into the back, settled Relena in on one seat while Simons took the other and began to check Heero again. Dalton hopped in the driver's seat and began the trek back to the hospital.

Treize watched them leave and then turned around to face Otto and Taurus. His eyes watered when he took in the dejected state of the horse and groom. His heart was heavy in his chest and his stomach felt like it had a brick in it. He wanted to scream, shout his frustrations out to the heavens.
above, but he couldn't. All he could do was wait, hope and pray.

A car came speeding down the main road, braked heavily and then swung into the lane. Treize recognized it as Duo and he squared his shoulders.

Duo had the door open and was out of the car before he'd stopped completely. "Where is he? What happened? Is he okay?" Duo called as he sprinted towards Treize. "Oh my fucking god!" he added when he pulled up short, seeing the injuries to Taurus.

Treize grabbed the vet by the shoulders and fixed him with his eye. "Duo, calm down. Heero's just left in the ambulance. They're taking him straight to Salsbury Memorial Hospital. They suspect a broken arm, dislocated collar bone and probably concussion. They couldn't say anymore as they don't know until he has tests."

"Is he still unconscious?"

"Yes." Treize paused, knowing the vet wasn't going to like the next bit of information. "Relena's gone with him."

"What?!" Duo paled and then his jaw clenched in anger. "What's that pink fucking piece of crap think she's doing? Heero's my partner, not hers!"

Taking a deep breath, Treize shook Duo by the shoulders. "Listen to me," he began and then went on to explain exactly what had happened, how Taurus had taken fright at the sight of Relena hobbling with her crutches across the paddock to the subsequent fall and what had happened since.

"I'll kill her," Duo ground out, barely holding onto his temper. "I'll fucking eviscerate her, without an anesthetic and then feed her entrails to the fucking crows. That bitch!"

"That's enough, Duo! The ambulance officers needed someone to go with them to answer questions while Heero is still out. They also want the name and contact details of his next of kin. I don't have those details on me right now, I do have them on file in my office and I said I would call them as soon as I could and pass that information on. Until then they needed someone to provide answers to questions they have to ask."

"And you thought that fucking pink parasite would be okay to send? I'll tell you who Heero's next of kin is; it's me, Treize, fucking me! We both had all the official paperwork drawn up about a year ago. I'm Heero's next of kin and he's mine. I know him, know his history, she fucking doesn't."

"I'm sorry, Duo. I would have gone myself, but, as you can see," Treize waved his hand at Taurus, "I have another creature to take care of."

"Oh shit." Duo felt bad. He'd been venting his anger on Treize when it wasn't the man's fault at all. It was that pink bitch's. "Call the hospital, Treize. Tell them I'm Heero's next of kin and I'll be there as soon as possible. You can tell them I'll have the power of attorney papers faxed through to them to confirm it. Meanwhile they are not to do anything until I get there and give my consent, unless Heero's life is in danger. That pink cow is not to be taken notice of at all. Understand?!" Duo's eyes blazed as he spoke.

"I'll call them now."

"Thank you. The horse?"

"I've contacted Oakford, a vet is on his way."
Duo desperately wanted to go to the hospital and Heero, but he couldn't leave the animal standing there without doing something, his conscience wouldn't let him. His voice changed dramatically, the anger being replaced with a soothing tone as he approached the injured horse.

Treize watched from the corner of his eye as he spoke to the receptionist at the hospital. He gave her all the details, telling her they were to ignore any information from Relena and wait for Duo to get there for consent to any procedures necessary. The receptionist took all the information and assured Treize she would pass it on as soon as the ambulance arrived. Pocketing the cell phone, Treize walked over to join the vet.

Duo ran his eyes over the horse, his chest felt heavy as he took in the damage. Numerous lacerations to the hind legs, scrapes and cuts to the shoulders and foreleg. Crushed muzzle and that left foreleg. Duo shuddered and gently examined the leg with practiced fingers. The bone protruded through torn flesh of the forearm, blood congealing around the wound. "Jesus," he muttered under his breath and then turned away. "You said you have a vet en route to him?"

"Yes," Treize took a look at his watch. "He should be here in about another five minutes."

Running a hand through his bangs, Duo sighed. "I have to go to the hospital, Heero needs me, but I can't leave that horse in that state. Do you have any objection to me giving him a painkiller? It will help a little until the other vet gets here and can take a proper look at his injuries." Duo didn't think there was any hope for the horse, but he wasn't the vet that had been called in so it wasn't his call to make. The least he could do though, without overstepping the veterinary boundaries, was to relieve the animal's pain.

"If you could I'd be grateful," replied Treize.

"No problem." Duo jogged back to his car and rummaged around in the boot. Finding the drug he needed, Duo quickly filled a syringe, attached a needle and grabbed a swab. "Easy, fella," Duo murmured as he dug a thumb into the jugular, swabbed and then injected the painkiller into the vein. "That should start to kick in pretty much straight away," he told Treize.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'd better go."

"I'll call you once the vet has finished with Taurus and I have things under control here. Is it okay for me to come up to the hospital?" Treize asked.

"Of course it is, Treize. I'll see you there later. Good luck with the horse."

"Thanks."

Duo took off at a run and got back into his car. He drove off in the direction of the hospital, still seething at the gall of the pink parasite.

* * *

Zechs checked his directions again and then spotted the small turn off. He indicated and turned the car from the main road into the small lane, up ahead he could see three people and a horse. "That must be them," he said to himself as he brought the car as close as possible. Getting out, his eyes ran over what he could see of the horse and his brow furrowed.

Spotting the car, Treize walked over to greet the vet. As the person got out of the vehicle, Treize felt his steps falter for a second before he quickly regained his composure.
"Treize Kushrenada?" Zechs asked as the ginger haired man walked towards him.

"That's me. Are you from Oakford?"

"Yes. Zechs Merquise at your service," said Zechs and shook the offered hand. "What's the news on Heero?"

"Broken arm, dislocated collar bone, probably concussion. Anything else we won't know until he's been checked by a doctor."

"And this is the horse?"

"Yes. This is Taurus. Doctor Maxwell gave him a painkiller a few minutes ago when he got here. He's gone direct to the hospital now, but said he couldn't leave Taurus in pain."

"Good. I appreciate him doing that. Easy, boy." Zechs moved close and began his examination.

Otto had put the rug over the horse to try and help with the shivering caused by the shock. He'd removed the saddle and tried to get the bridle off, but with Taurus' crushed muzzle he'd had to unbuckle all the straps and remove the bridle in pieces, the hardest being to try and slip the bit out of the horse's mouth.

Zechs stood up slowly from where he'd been crouched, examining the extent of the damage to the horse's left foreleg. He turned to face Treize, his mouth set in a grim line.

"How bad is it?" Treize asked with a tremble in his voice.

"I won't beat about the bush with you." Zechs took a deep breath. "The lacerations to the hind legs and shoulders can be cleaned and stitched. The damage to the muzzle... He's crushed the nasal bone and broken several teeth. Surgery could help, although it would be a big risk with only a thirty percent chance of success. The left fore, that's the problem. Both the ulna and radius bones have been broken. The radius has splintered and broken through the skin and in doing so has sliced the extensor pedis muscle and shredded part of the extensor metacarpi magnus muscle."

"Which all translates into?" Treize asked.

"I'm afraid there is nothing I can do for him, Mr Khushrenada. The kindest thing to do would be to put him down."

"I see." Treize turned and looked at the chestnut. The painkiller that Duo had administered had done its job, easing the animal's distress and Taurus stood quietly.

"I'm sorry." Zechs said softly.

Treize turned his attention back to the vet, his saddened eyes telling the painful struggle he was undergoing. "You can..?"

"I have my humane killer in the car."

"Thank you. Could I just have a couple of moments, please?"

"Take all the time you need. I'll wait by the car." Zechs gave the other man a comforting squeeze to the shoulder then turned to go back to the car and fetch the humane killer.

Treize walked over to the horse and gently stroked the chestnut neck. His pained eyes sought Otto's. "You heard?"
"Yes, boss."

"I'll hold him if you would prefer, Otto."

"Thanks, boss, but if it's okay with you, I'd like to stay here with him."

"I understand."

Otto called the stable boy, Henry over and had him assist in taking the horse's gear to the land rover and give Treize a few moments alone with the horse to say his good-byes.

Rubbing his hand against Taurus' forehead, Treize spoke softly. "You had the ability to be a good horse, win some top events. I'm so sorry it has to end this way. I wish, I wish I could turn back the clock, I wish the gate had been open, not closed, I should have done more to try and help Heero stop you." Despite having run the scenario through his head several times, Treize knew in his own heart there was nothing he could have done to change what had happened.

"I'm going to miss you, Taurus. Forgive me, but I cannot let you suffer any more." Treize handed the lead rope to Otto and quickly turned his head away. The water was pooling in his eyes and he didn't want anyone to see his distress.

Zechs knew it was an emotional moment, heartbreaking was more to the point. Zechs hated this part of the job, but he knew he was offering some comfort to the horse by ending its pain. As Treize walked away, Zechs pushed off the car and with the humane killer in hand and approached the horse and groom.

"Are you going to be okay to hold him? Or if you would prefer, I can do this by myself," Zechs said quietly.

Otto gave a nod in recognition to the vet giving him the chance to leave. "I'll stay with him."

"Okay." Zechs didn't have to say anything more, he could tell from the old groom's manner that he didn't want the horse's last few seconds to be with a stranger. "Just hold him steady." Zechs turned to look quickly over his shoulder. Treize was standing by the land rover, his back to them, the stable boy was beside him, also facing away. Zechs raised the humane killer to Taurus' head and pulled the trigger.

~ * ~

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~ * ~

tbc...

[1] 000: Here in Australia the number to call for emergencies is 000. In the UK, it's 999 and in the US, 911. Being as this fic is set in Australia I've used the Aussie emergency number.

For a full picture of the horse's skeleton try here:http://www.ponyclubvic.org.au/?Page=82 or http://www.newrider.com/Library/Misc_Tips/skeleton.html

For the muscular system: http://www.ponyclubvic.org.au/?Page=84
Dalton drove quickly towards the hospital, glancing from time to time into the rear view mirror and checking his partner was okay. Simons had set up a drip into the young man's arm and checked the flow rate. He applied a cool compress to the bruise that was darkening on Heero's temple and checked the vitals again. He'd placed a temporary 'blow up' splint on the man's arm, immobilizing the injured limb and preventing further damage.

Dalton picked up the two way radio. "Mobile unit forty-two to base."

"Base here, go ahead, mobile forty-two."

"Have picked up patient and are en route to Salsbury Memorial. Patient stable, but unconscious."

"Got that, mobile forty-two. Have you contacted Salsbury Memorial yet?"

"Am going to do that next, base."

"Roger that."

"Will call in again once we're clear to leave Salsbury."

"Thank you, mobile forty-two. Base out."

"Mobile forty-two out." Dalton pressed another button on the two way unit. "Salsbury Memorial, this is mobile ambulance unit forty-two. Do you copy?"

"Go ahead, mobile forty-two, this is Salsbury Memorial receiving you loud and clear."

"I'm en route with a patient. Fall from a horse."

"Roger that. Name and details of injuries?"

"Heero Yuy. Was knocked out when he fell and is still unconscious. Bruising to the right temple, suspected concussion, fracture to the right humerus and dislocated collar bone. Possibly internal damage, but will need an ultrasound to determine. I don't think there is any damage to the neck or spine, but he's in a neck brace to be sure."

"Thanks, mobile forty-two. We have a surgical consult on standby. Will meet you in the emergency drop off bay. ETA?"

"Ten minutes."

"Roger that."

"Mobile forty-two out."

"Salsbury Memorial out."

Dalton hung up the small hand piece and reached behind to slide the small partition across. "How's he doing?"
"No change," replied Simons. "How long?"

"Just under ten minutes. I've called it in and they will have a crew waiting for us."

"Okay." Simons turned back to his patient, lifting Heero's eyelids again and flashing the small light in them. There wasn't any reaction and that worried Simons.

Relena had sat quietly holding Heero’s left hand until the ambulance officer had placed the drip in it. Now she sat with her hand resting lightly on Heero's shoulder.

"Ma'am, I need to get some details," Simons said quietly.

Relena looked up and gave a smile. "Certainly."

"I have his name as Heero Yuy. Correct?"

"Yes."

"What's his date of birth?"

"Ummm."

"Address?"

"Ah."

Simons frowned. "I thought you said you were his fiancée?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Excuse me?"

"He hasn't asked me yet, but he will soon."

"Are you his next of kin?"

"Errr..."

"I see." Simons put down the clipboard, trying not to show his annoyance. A soft grunt alerted him to his patient and Simons immediately transferred his attention.

* * *

Soft noises and a rocking motion began to penetrate Heero's black world. Slowly he clawed his way through the thick fog, senses starting to come back on line as he drew closer to consciousness. Images flashed behind closed eyelids, shouting, wind rushing past the feel of an animal beneath him and then...

Pain.

Heero grunted as the pain flooded his system.

"Easy there, Mr. Yuy."

Heero didn't recognize the voice. Sluggish eyes began to open and Heero blinked as his vision blurred and then began to clear.
"Can you hear me, Mr. Yuy?"

"Heero," he managed to force past a dry throat.

"Heero. Can you remember what happened?"

Heero began to shake his head. Pain exploded inside his skull and he let out a soft cry.

"Just lie still, Heero. I'm Ambulance Officer Simons. You've taken a fall from a horse, a pretty nasty one too. You're in the ambulance and on the way to Salsbury Memorial Hospital for assessment and treatment."

"Aa." Heero closed his eyes for a moment trying to remember, but came up blank.

"Your partner is here," Simons said.

"Duo?"

Relena scowled. "Heero, honey. It's me, Relena. Don't you remember me?"

"Relena?" Heero croaked out.

"Yes, sweetie. It's me. You remember me, don't you? Relena? You were going to ask me to marry you?"

Heero knew that a large chunk of his memory was missing, but not enough for him to know he wasn't in love with Relena, he was in love with Duo. "You're not my partner. Where's Duo? I want Duo!" Heero began to get agitated and tried to move. Pain lanced through his head and arm causing Heero to scream.

"Lie still!" Simons commanded. "You have a broken arm and moving around will only add to the injury and your pain. I can't give you anything until the hospital has checked you out as we don't know if you have any internal injuries."

Heero quieted and the pain faded to a throbbing ache. "Duo?" he breathed as his vision began to swim and blackness claimed him once more.

"Who is this Duo?" Simons asked, noting that Heero had passed out again and began to check his vitals.

Relena shrugged. "He's a two bit country vet that Heero shares a house with. I doubt he will even show up."

Doing his best to maintain his composure, Simons spoke again. "Do you happen to know the full name of the vet?"

"Maxwell, Duo Maxwell, I think. Why?"

"We need to contact him."

"What for? He can't help you, he's probably too busy playing around with the dogs and cats."

"He needs to be notified about his house mate's situation. He can probably give us the rest of the information we need as well."

"I still don't see why he needs to be involved," Relena muttered under her breath.
Simons glanced sideways at the woman. It was clear to him there was more going on here than he really cared to know, but for the safety and well being of his patient, not to mention protocol, Simons had to cover all bases and if this guy was sharing a house with a vet then the chances are the vet would be able to give them all the required information. Simons pulled his notebook from his pocket and wrote the name down. He'd give it to the hospital staff once they arrived at emergency and then it was up to them to chase the vet up.

Dalton spotted the signs to the hospital up ahead. "Almost there," he called through the partition.

"Good," replied Simons.

* * *

Treize jumped as the dull crack of the humane killer resounded through the still air. He squeezed his eyes shut and bit down on his lip.

Otto bowed his head and then wiped his eyes. He looked up as a warm hand patted his shoulder. The soft, blue eyes of the blonde vet gazed back at him.

"Are you okay?" Zechs asked quietly.

Otto nodded and then turned to pick up Taurus' rug from where he'd put it on the ground so the vet could check the horse. Gently he opened the rug out and spread it over the chestnut body that lay still upon the earth. Straightening up he sniffed a couple of times then squared his shoulders. "I'd better see what the boss wants doing with the body."

Zechs returned to the car and locked the humane killer back in its box, securing it in the trunk of the car. He turned around and saw Otto speaking with Treize. He walked over to them. "I'm sorry," was all he said.

Treize looked up into genuine sapphire eyes. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"No problem. I just wish there was more I could have done."

"It's not your fault. You did everything you could for him."

"I know this isn't an easy time for you, but."

"The body needs to be disposed of and soon. Do you have any idea what you wish to do? I can suggest some things and give you contact numbers if you wish."

"He's not going for pet meat."

"Of course not. I was going to suggest a place that does burials or cremations," said Zechs softly.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to snap. I think I'll arrange to have him buried."

"If you need a contact number."

"Thanks, but I have equipment at the stables I can use." Treize turned and felt the lump rise to his throat again as he spotted the rug covering Taurus' body.

"If you have no objection, I'll run you back up to your house. You're in no condition to drive and I think you could do with a stiff drink."

Treize turned and smiled, noticing, not for the first time how handsome the tall vet was. "Thank you. That would be most appreciated. I'll just talk with Otto for a moment to arrange to have the backhoe
come down and bury Taurus. I'd like him to be buried in the jumping paddock. I think he would have liked that."

Zechs could see that shock was beginning to settle into the other man. "Okay. You make your arrangements with Otto. I'll wait by the car." Zechs walked back over to his vehicle and pulled out his cell phone. He called the surgery and reported in, explaining what had happened and that he was going to stay with the owner for a little while to make sure he was okay.

Treize spoke with Otto and arranged for the groom to have the backhoe sent down. He pointed out where he would like 'Taurus' final resting place to be. With the arrangements made, Treize began to walk back towards Zechs' car, stopping for a moment where Taurus lay. Two tears tracked down his cheeks as he said a silent prayer for the animal. Hastily he scrubbed them away and then continued towards the vet and his car.

* * *

Duo pushed the car as fast as legally possible. A string of curses tumbled from his lips as he drove. He was angry, upset and scared. Heero was uppermost in his mind and yet he couldn't help feeling guilty about leaving Taurus. The animal had needed veterinary care and he hadn't given it. Yes, he'd injected a painkiller, but he should have done more. A niggling voice in the back of his head told him there wasn't anything else he could have done. Treize had called another vet, protocol and ethics dictated that he wasn't allowed to administer care to another vet's patient without that vet's specific permission. Although, under the circumstances he didn't think he would be getting a reprimand for giving the horse a painkiller.

The signs for the hospital came into view and Duo slowed a little to negotiate the smaller, more congested streets of the Salsbury township. He found the entrance to the hospital and drove up, noting where the car park was in relation to the emergency section. He cruised the car park looking for a vacant spot and cursing the fact that every man and his dog seemed to be at the hospital today. For a brief moment he contemplated parking in the 'Doctors Only' section. Technically speaking he was a doctor, a doctor of animals though, not humans.

He spied a vacant spot and shot into it. Slamming the car into 'park', Duo shut off the engine and jumped out. Locking the car he sprinted for the emergency section. As he was jogging towards the doors, his cell phone rang. Cursing, Duo grabbed it from his pocket and flipped it open. "Doctor Maxwell," he answered, slightly out of breath.

***

Dalton brought the ambulance to a smooth stop in the ambulance bay outside the emergency section of the hospital. Cutting the motor, he climbed out and headed for the back of the vehicle. A doctor and two nurses came out to meet him.

"I'm Doctor Standish," said the doctor. "This the horse accident?"

"Yeah." Dalton opened the double doors and grabbed the end of the gurney. Inside, Simons assisted, pushing the gurney back as Dalton pulled. The collapsible legs folded out and Simons stepped out to join his partner.

Simons handed his chart to the doctor. "Heero Yuy, male, approximately twenty five to thirty years old. Took a fall from a horse. Broken right humerus, dislocated right collar bone, concussion. Possible internal injuries although blood pressure doesn't indicate such. All vitals are on the sheet, checked every ten minutes. Was knocked out when he fell, has returned to consciousness once and is now unconscious again. Was reasonably coherent although disorientated."
The doctor took the chart and scanned over it. "There isn't much information on here," he said calmly and pointedly looked at the officer. He turned his head though as Relena began to step out of the ambulance. Dalton gave her a hand. "Who is that?" the doctor asked.

Motioning for the doctor to move to the side, Simons filled him in. "She was at the scene of the accident. Claimed to be his fiancée, but I have my doubts."

"Oh?"

"Yes, she doesn't know anything about the patient other than his name and that he shares a house with a vet called..." Simons grabbed his notebook from his pocket and flipped it open. "A Doctor Duo Maxwell."

"Strange," said the doctor.

"That's what I thought. When the patient came around I told him his partner was with us and he started calling for this Duo person. There's something not right with that woman, doc. I don't have a number for this vet, but I'd be trying to find it if I were you and give this vet a call. I think he would be able to give you the information you need."

"Thank you." Doctor Standish turned back to the gurney and his patient. "Let's get him inside to trauma two," he barked.

Dalton began to push the gurney, one of the nurses assisting him while the other led Relena through to the waiting room.

Doctor Standish headed for the emergency nurses’ station, spying the head duty nursing sister he quickly approached her. "Sister Clarke, I have a patient just brought in via ambulance..." Doctor Standish quickly explained the lack of information to the sister and the name of the vet Simons had given him.

"A Doctor Duo Maxwell, you said?"

"That's correct, sister."

"I've taken a call just a couple of minutes ago from the patient's boss, the one that called the ambulance. He said something about a Doctor Maxwell being this patient's next of kin and that no tests or anything else were to be done until he got here. Apparently he's on his way in," Sister Clarke stated. "I do have a contact number for him if you would like me to give him a call?"

"Please do. I'll go and start checking the patient over. Find out how long this Maxwell is going to be and get any information on the patient that you can."

"Will do, Doctor Standish." The nursing sister went to the desk and picked up the piece of paper with the details before picking up the 'phone and dialing the cell number.

"Doctor Maxwell."

"Ah, Doctor Maxwell, this is Sister Clarke from the Salsbury Memorial Hospital Emergency department. I'm not sure if you are aware or not but your house mate a - " Sister Clarke looked quickly at the admittance board. " - A Mr. Heero Yuy has been brought in suffering injuries sustained when falling from a horse."

"Yes, sister. I know all about the fall. I'm on my way in."
"I believe you are Mr. Yuy's next of kin?"

"Yes, yes, I am. I've also got power of attorney so don't you dare let that pink bitch have any say in Heero's treatment. In fact, unless you want a second casualty on your hands I suggest you might want to keep that pink cow right away from me."

"Pink... I beg your pardon?"

"Errr... Sorry."

"Doctor Maxwell, how long before you can get here?"

"I'm here now, just walking through your front doors," Duo replied as he stepped inside the hospital emergency section.

Sister Clarke looked up and spotted a slender man with a long braid of hair walking through the sliding doors. "You have a braid of hair?"

"Yup."

"Stay right where you are, Doctor Maxwell, I'm coming over to you." Sister Clarke hung up the phone and slipped out from behind the desk. She walked quickly across the floor to where Duo stood gazing around. She noted his eyes settle upon her and he began to walk towards her. "Doctor Maxwell?"

"Yeah. You Sister Clarke?"

"Yes, yes, I am. Mr. Yuy was brought in a couple of minutes ago. Doctor Standish is with him now assessing the injuries. If you could come with me for a moment there's some information I need. You said you were his next of kin?"

"Yes, I am. The official paperwork is lodged at the solicitors firm Gordon and Klink. I can have them fax it over if you need me to."

"That might be an idea," said the nurse. "Not that I don't believe you, I do, but, well, it's for the paperwork. We have to keep everything legal and such so having a copy of the document would be good."

"I quite understand. I'll give them a call in a moment and have them sent."

"Thank you. Just go in there, Doctor Maxwell. I'll let Doctor Standish know you're here and I'll be right back with the paperwork."

Duo stepped inside the small room the nurse had led him to and took a seat. He pulled his cell phone out and placed the call to his solicitors, requesting the papers be faxed through that confirmed his status as Heero's next of kin. Having finished the call, he placed his cell back in his pocket as the nurse came back in.

"I know you must be anxious to see your house mate, Doctor Maxwell..."

"Duo, please call me Duo. It feels kinda funny you calling me Doctor when I'm in a hospital and all." Duo gave a lopsided grin.

The nurse laughed. "I see what you mean, although you are a doctor, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I'm a vet. Don't think it would go down too well in here though if someone overheard me
being called doctor and then expected me to treat a patient. My patients have fur, feathers or fins and
don't talk," Duo chuckled despite his anxiety.

"Point noted, Doc - Duo."

The paperwork didn't take long, Duo answering the nurse's questions as best he could. They were
pretty straight forward, date of birth, address, employer, any known allergies and so on. Sister Clarke
wrote everything down in her neat handwriting.

"That's it," she said smiling. "Thank you for your patience and cooperation. Now, I suspect you're
wanting to know what's going on with your friend?"

Duo nodded. He was fiddling with the end of his braid, something he was apt to do when worried.

"I'll go and check with Doctor Standish and give him this information. Oh, Duo?"

"Yeah?"

"You said something about a pink person before?"

Duo gave a sheepish grin. "Sorry about that, I gotta learn to watch my mouth."

"A woman came in with Mr. Yuy, I'm assuming that's who you were referring to?"

Feeling the anger flaring again, Duo looked up at the nurse. "That cow had better not be anywhere
near Heero or given permission for any procedures concerning him," he growled.

The nurse looked at Duo for a moment. "Obviously there is something going on here. Would you
care to explain a little for me, please? I don't need full details but an outline would be good. Then at
least I know what I'm dealing with. The woman concerned is sitting in the waiting room though and
hasn't been consulted regarding Mr. Yuy in any way."

Running a hand through his bangs, Duo decided to give the nurse just enough information on the
situation regarding Relena. He thought he'd better, not just for Heero's sake but for his own and
Relena's. Knowing his temper the way he did, Relena wouldn't last five minutes with Duo given the
mood he was in. Better to let the hospital staff know to keep the woman right away from him or there
would be more blood spilt.

Sister Clarke shook her head. "I see what you mean, Duo. Although you do realize that we cannot
stop her from visiting the patient unless the patient specifically requests she not be allowed in."

"I understand what you're saying, sister. Trust me though, once Heero regains consciousness he'll tell
you he doesn't want her near him." Duo had only given the sister a brief outline of Relena and her
obsession towards Heero. He didn't say anything about their own relationship, at this stage the
hospital didn't need to know. Duo preferred to keep it that way. Only if it became necessary would
he tell them. Meanwhile, he'd stressed yet again the importance of keeping Relena away from him, at
least until he'd had time to curb his temper a bit.

"Right. If you would care to wait here for a couple of minutes I'll go and see what is happening
regarding Mr. Yuy." Sister Clarke smiled and got up, leaving Duo alone with his thoughts.

* * *

The ambulance officers brought the gurney to a stop beside the bed in trauma two. Doctor Standish
reached over and grasped the edge of the sheet underneath the patient.
"On my count of three," he said to the ambulance officers and nurses that had also grabbed the edge of the sheet.

"One, two, three." Heero was transported from the gurney to the bed and the ambulance officers were able to leave.

"Good luck, doc," said Dalton as he pushed the gurney from the room.

"Thanks, guys," replied the doctor and began to examine his patient.

Sister Clarke entered the room and informed him that the mysterious Doctor Duo Maxwell had been contacted and was now at the hospital. Standish gave a sigh of relief. "That's good news. I'll leave you to get the information on the patient, once you're done please bring me that information and then I'll know what's the best course of action to take."

"Will do, doctor," replied Sister Clarke and had then left.

Doctor Standish resumed his examination of the patient. Carefully, he went over Heero's still unconscious form. He checked Heero's pupils, felt around his neck and jaw then moved lower to the chest. His brow furrowed as he continued the examination. Definite displacement of the clavicle, he noted. Humerus fracture, although how bad, he couldn't tell until x-rays had been taken. Gently he began to manipulate Heero's abdomen, feeling through experienced fingers for any sign that something was not as it should be. He felt fairly confident that there wasn't any internal damage, but he would need an ultrasound to confirm his diagnosis.

The bruise on the young man's head concerned him a bit, that combined with the length of time the man had been out for had him a little worried. The ambulance men had said that Yuy had regained consciousness for a few minutes in the ambulance and that was a good sign. Now if only he would surface again. Turning to the nurses in the room he gave his orders for the drip to be monitored. Sister Clarke returned with the paperwork and he quickly scanned it. Noting any past medical history he felt confident in ordering pethidine as a painkiller to be administered intravenously. With his patient under the watchful eyes of the trauma room nurses, Doctor Standish left for a moment to go and speak with the young man's house mate.

"Where is this Maxwell person?" he asked the sister.

"He's in the matron's office."

"Right. I'll go talk to him now and then maybe we can start to get something done for this guy." Standish walked swiftly to the matron's office and entered. He paused as he took in the sight of the man before him. Slender figure, long braid of hair, unusual violet colored eyes and an expression of concern and worry. Standish immediately warmed to the man.

"Doctor Duo Maxwell?"

Duo nodded and stood up, taking the offered hand and shaking it firmly.

"I'm Doctor Standish, I'm the consulting physician on your house mate, Mr. Yuy."

"How is Heero?"

"Take a seat, Doctor Maxwell, and I'll give you the complete run down of Mr. Yuy's condition."

Duo did as requested, sitting back down in the chair and watching the doctor, trying to read the other man's body language as the doctor took a seat on the other side of the matron's desk. He fixed his
gaze anxiously on the doctor's face, waiting for the worst.

"Mr. Yuy has a fracture of the right humerus, how bad we do not know until we take x-rays. His right clavicle is also dislocated. There doesn't appear to be any internal injury and his legs are fine, that I can confirm after giving him an ultrasound. He has bruising to the right temple and suspected concussion. I'm a little concerned that he's only regained consciousness for a few minutes in the ambulance on the way here and I'd like to take a cat scan of his skull to eliminate any injury to the brain."

"Shit," muttered Duo to himself.

"Doctor Maxwell, I'd like to get these tests and scans done as soon as possible, the sooner we can get the results the sooner we can help Mr. Yuy. As Mr. Yuy is still unconscious I need your permission on his behalf to carry out these tests."

"Please, doc. You do whatever it is you have to do to help Heero."

"Thank you. I'll arrange for the tests immediately."

Duo looked up at the doctor. "He's going to be okay, isn't he?" Duo couldn't help the slight quaver to his voice as he asked.

"I wish I could say for certain that he will, but until I have the results of all the tests there is no way I can promise you that."

"I understand." Duo did. How many times had he been asked the same question when treating a client's pet?

"Why don't you pop down to the cafeteria and get a cup of coffee or something? These tests are going to take a little while to do."

"Thanks. I just might do that," replied Duo.

"Sister Clarke will point you in the right direction. When you come back up just stop at the nurses' station and they will direct you to the waiting room."

"Okay."

Doctor Standish left and returned to his patient, wanting to have the tests done as soon as possible. Duo went back to the nurses’ station where Sister Clarke explained where the hospital cafeteria was. Duo walked over to the elevator and pushed the button. He'd get a coffee and call the surgery to let Catherine know what the situation was. He'd also call Treize and fill him in, as well as find out what had happened with Taurus.

The elevator doors slid open and Duo stepped in. He pushed the button for the fourth floor and the doors closed.

Tired of waiting in the waiting room, Relena drew her crutches under her arms and hobbled out to the nurses’ station. The sound of elevator doors closing reached her ears but she paid no attention, her eyes were fixed on the nurse behind the desk and getting information on what was happening with her Heero.

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 24

Zechs followed the instructions that Treize gave him and a few minutes later they were pulling up at
the back of Treize's house. Zechs brought the car to a stop and cut the engine, turning to the ginger
haired man beside him, he spoke softly. "Come on, I'll take you inside." Getting out, Zechs walked
around to the passenger side and waited while Treize exited the car before locking it. Placing a hand
upon the other man's elbow, Zechs steered Treize towards the back door of the house.

They entered the house and stepped into the kitchen, Zechs looking around for where the doorway
would be to lead them into the rest of the residence. Treize seemed to come out of his shock and
stepped across the kitchen and through to the hall where he headed for the study. Zechs followed, a
little unsure of what to do or say but concerned enough to know that Treize shouldn't be left alone
right now.

"Is there anyone here to stay with you?" Zechs asked as he walked into the study behind Treize.
"Wife, girlfriend?"

"No. I'm not married, don't have a girlfriend, or boyfriend for that matter right now and it's my
housekeeper Jenny's day off," replied Treize as he slumped onto the red leather couch in the office.

"Oh." Zechs spotted a small liquor cabinet behind the large, oak desk and made a beeline for it as his
mind processed the words Treize had just said. Not married, no girlfriend or boyfriend. It was the
word 'boyfriend' that stuck most in his mind. Zechs shook himself. He had to leave that thought
alone. The man was in shock, grief at losing a good horse a fresh wound and Zechs was a
professional; at least he hoped he was.

Reaching into the cabinet, Zechs pulled out two glasses and a crystal decanter of amber fluid.
Releasing the stopper and sniffing the contents his nose informed him that it was what he thought -
scotch. He poured a generous amount into one glass and then locating a bottle of lime, he added a
dash of that and some soda water to the other glass. Walking back over to the couch, Zechs handed
the scotch to Treize, keeping the lime and soda for himself.

"Drink this," Zechs said softly.

Taking the glass, Treize looked at it for a moment, swished the fluid around and then took a long
draught. The scotch burnt a fiery trail down his gullet and he coughed a couple of times with the
strength of it.

"Easy," said Zechs as he sat beside the man. "Don't go drinking it too fast, it's pretty powerful stuff."

Treize managed a small smile and then dragged himself out of his dark thoughts long enough to
realize that the vet had actually made him a drink and was sitting here with him. Then another
thought hit him. "Shouldn't you be going back to work?"

"It's okay. I called the surgery to explain what had happened. They know where I am and they have
my cell number if they need me. Right now though, you need me more. You've just suffered a
traumatic experience, I'm not about to go and leave you to deal with it alone."

Treize lowered his eyes and stared long and hard into his glass. "He...he was a good horse," Treize
began softly. "He didn't deserve this. Yeah, he was hot headed and temperamental at times, but
Heero had him working so well and then..." Treize's voice hitched as the scene played in his head for
the umpteenth time. "Oh god."

Carefully, Zechs took the glass from a trembling hand and set it on the coffee table. The man beside him broke down, the grief and stress of the past couple of hours catching up with him.

Unable to hold back any longer, Treize gave in to the overwhelming sadness that filled his heart. He felt the glass leave his hand, then warm, strong arms enveloped his shaking shoulders and Treize found himself with his face buried between the vet's neck and shoulder. Images of Taurus and Heero flashed through his mind, the sound of the humane killer rang in his eardrums and Treize let it all go. He sobbed onto the other man's shoulder, unable to stop the tide of grief that overwhelmed him.

Zechs held the proud man. He didn't comment, didn't offer anything in the way of comfort other than to hold the other man and let him get it all out of his system. Words wouldn't have been any good anyway. What can you say to someone who has just lost a valued friend? Zechs didn't think of horses as animals, he thought of them as friends and knew the grief of loss was something only time could heal. For now what was needed was reassurance, an ear to listen and a shoulder to grieve on and Zechs could at least offer that much.

Gradually the pain eased a little and Treize managed to get himself back under control. He sniffed a couple of times and then began to pull back, fully aware of the vet's strong arms leaving him and missing the warmth of their contact. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. Drying his eyes, Treize then blew his nose and reached for the glass of scotch as he tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket. He avoided looking at the vet for the moment, at least until he'd gotten himself back under control. Taking a deep breath and following it with another swallow of the alcohol, he felt in control enough to look the vet in the eye.

"I'm sorry about that," Treize said softly, noticing how blue the vet's eyes were.

"No need to apologize, I quite understand," replied Zechs, his eyes warm with compassion.

"You'd think that with all the animals I have out there in the stables I wouldn't get so upset over just one."

"You could have a hundred animals out there and it would still hurt just as much."

Treize's eyes widen.

Hoping he wasn't overstepping the line, Zechs placed his hand on Treize's arm. "That's the one thing about being human, the heart is big enough to love one or many with equal passion."

"You're a wise person, Doctor Merquise."

"Call me Zechs."

Treize nodded and drained his glass. "Thank you for understanding, for all you did."

"I'm sorry I couldn't have done more."

"I don't think anyone could have done anything for him."

"Given his injuries you did the right thing." Zechs squeezed the muscular arm and then removed his hand.

"Shit! Heero." With the loss of Taurus and ensuing grief, Treize had momentarily forgotten about Heero.
"Which hospital were they taking him to?"

"Salsbury Memorial. I need to ring them and see what's happening." Treize stood up and began to fish around in his pocket for his cell phone. Locating it, he pulled it out and was about to call the hospital when it rang. "Treize Kushrenada," he said.

***

Duo found the cafeteria on the fourth floor and got himself a cup of coffee. It was strong, too strong, reminding Duo of liquid tar but he sipped at it anyway. He needed something to help keep him focused and he was sure the amount of caffeine in the cup would certainly do that. Duo found a vacant table to the side and sat down, taking his cell phone out to make the necessary calls. He called the practice first.

"Maxwell Veterinary practice, how can I help you?"

"Catherine, it's Duo."

"Duo! How's Heero? Is he going to be okay? What injuries does he have?"

"Whoa, slow down, Catherine." Duo couldn't help a small chuckle. "I've spoken with the doc who is treating Heero. I'm not completely sure of his injuries as yet as they are doing tests. At this stage I can confirm that he has a broken arm, dislocated collar bone and probably concussion. They're doing a cat scan as well to be safe as he took a hefty knock to the head and he's only come around once since the fall."

"Shit. Oh, Duo, I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well..." Duo paused for a moment as his throat began to close up on him.

"Don't you worry about anything here. Hilde is going to cover all the consults and surgery, and I'm fine to keep the kennels clean and look after any of the patients we have. Trowa and Quatre are going to come over and do the horses, so they will be fine."

"Thanks, Catherine."

"You're welcome, Duo. We all care very much about Heero, and you too. You stay with him and when he comes around, please, let him know we're all thinking about him and give him our love for a speedy recovery."

"I will."

"I'll let the others know you called."

"Thanks. I'll call again once I have more news."

"Okay, Duo. Take care."

"Bye, Catherine."

"Bye."

Duo disconnected the call and ran a tired hand through his bangs. A warmth spread through him as he realized what good friends he had. Taking another sip of the coffee and trying not to grimace he called Treize.
"Treize Kushrenada."

"Treize, it's Duo."

"Duo! I was just about to call the hospital. What's the word on Heero? Is he okay? Has he come around yet? What are his injuries?"

"The doc's taking x-rays and scans now. He has a dislocated collar bone, fractured arm, concussion and I don't know what else until the results are in from the tests."

"Fuck! Duo, I'm so sorry..."

Duo interrupted the man before he could get any further. "Treize, it's not your fault. Heero knows the risks involved when riding, you know the risks involved. It's just one of those things, an accident."

"It's an accident that could have been averted."

"Yeah, well," Duo's voice became a low growl.

"I should have had more sense than to allow Relena to have come to the paddock to watch."

"Treize, it's done and over. No amount of 'if onlys' or 'I should haves' is going to change anything. What's done is done and we have to deal with it. I'm just giving you fair warning now though that once I catch up with that pink bitch I will be letting her have it. For her sake I hope she stays out of my sight for a while, at least until my urge for blood is gone."

Treize shuddered. He could only imagine the tongue lashing Relena would get from Duo.

"What happened with Taurus?" Duo's voice had taken on a soft tone.

"He, I, there wasn't anything we could do for him, Duo. Doctor Merquise had to put him down."

"Oh, Treize. I'm so sorry." The concern and pain was genuine in Duo's voice. It didn't come as a great shock though. Duo had had the chance to see the horse's injuries before heading to the hospital and he'd doubted very much if there would be anything anyone could do to save Taurus.

"So am I," Treize replied softly. "Heero had him working really well. I'm gonna miss that chestnut maniac."

"So will Heero. He's going to be very upset when he finds out." Duo knew Heero would most likely blame himself for the horse's demise when in truth it wasn't his fault.

"How are you holding up, Duo?"

"Ah, you know. Dealing with it."

Treize wasn't stupid, he could hear the strain coming through Duo's voice even though the vet was doing his best to mask it. "I'm coming to the hospital, Duo."

"Treize, you don't have to."

"I know I don't have to, I want to. You need some moral support too and I feel responsible, he is in my employ and it was one of my horses that caused this." Treize didn't add that it was really Relena's fault, they both already knew that.

"I'd like to come too, if I may," said Zechs from where he was still sitting on the couch.
"Doctor Merquise is still here too and would like to come. Would that be okay with you, Duo?"

"Thanks. That would be fine." Duo wouldn't admit to it but the company would be welcomed. He was starting to get a bit unnerved being by himself. The uncertainty of Heero's injuries was playing on his mind.

"I'll get cleaned up and be there as soon as I can."

"I'll be in the emergency department."

"Right. See you soon then."

"Will do. Bye." Duo disconnected and picked up his coffee. Might as well take it back to the emergency section to finish it off, at least then if it glued his insides together he was in the right place for treatment.

* * *

Trowa had informed Quatre of the situation with Heero and Duo and the blonde had immediately offered to help all he could, as Trowa knew he would. They had arrived at the practice and gotten the latest information from Catherine. With Heero's injuries yet to be completely confirmed, there was still an air of uncertainty over the place.

Heading for the stable block the pair set about settling the horses. Trowa checked the stables, noting that Heero had cleaned them out that morning. Turning the water buckets up the right way, Trowa began to fill them so that Quatre could then carry them into the stables. With the waters done, the pair went into the feed shed and spotted the three buckets standing in a row. The horse's names were written on each bucket.

"That certainly makes it a whole lot easier," remarked Quatre as he picked up the bucket with the name Zero on it.

"It does," replied Trowa. "I wonder what exactly Heero feeds them and how much." They walked towards the stables and placed the feeds inside.

"Better ask Duo if he knows, it's important not to mess around with a horse's feed stuff," said Trowa as they walked out towards the paddocks and the horses waiting at the gates to be brought in.

"Which one do you want to bring in?" asked Quatre as he observed the three faces all hanging over their respective paddock gates.

"I'll take Shini if you like. He can be a bit of a handful," replied Trowa knowing from earlier experience just how pushy the colt could get when he wanted to.

"Okay. I'll bring in Scythe then."

They snapped the lead ropes to the horse's halters and proceeded to bring them in. Scythe walked calmly beside Quatre but Trowa had his hands full with the colt. Every chance Shini got he would try to nip at Trowa. He wasn't a nasty natured animal, just young and playful. He could sense that Trowa wasn't as experienced as his usual master and decided to try and see how much he could get away with.

"Cut it out!" growled Trowa as his arm suffered yet another nip.

Quatre snickered. "If I remember correctly, Heero told you to be more forceful with him."
Trowa huffed and continued to walk. Shini saw another chance and managed to get a nip on Trowa's forearm, darting his head back quickly.

"Ow!" Trowa rubbed his arm and glared at the colt. "Don't push it too far," he scolded.

Shini looked back with liquid eyes. As soon as Trowa's attention was off him, he planted another nip, this time to Trowa's biceps.

Quatre was doing his best not to laugh out loud. It really was quite amusing to watch. He knew Trowa was soft hearted when it came to animals, but as Heero had said, horses were a large and potentially dangerous animal, they needed firm handling. "Smack him, Trowa. He's only going to keep on doing it if you don't."

"I prefer not to resort to violence," replied Trowa. He didn't like the thought of giving the colt a smack, he didn't believe in hitting anything if he could avoid it. He was used to dealing with animals that were neglected or mistreated and therefore required gentle handling. It hadn't registered in his brain yet that Shini wasn't any of those things.

They entered the stable block and Quatre put Scythe into her stable before grabbing her rug and putting it on. Across from him, Trowa had put Shini in his stable and was fetching the colt's rug. Quatre finished and walked over to watch the fun.

Shini had his head buried in his feed bin, Trowa heaved the rug over the colt's back and went to do up the chest strap. Shini went to have another nip, getting Trowa on the hip.

"For the love of all things equine, cut it out!" snapped Trowa.

Shini went back to eating his dinner.

"You're not going to keep on letting him get away with that, are you?" Quatre asked.

Trowa moved to the colt's flanks and bent to retrieve the leg strap. "I don't think..."

Trowa's words were cut off as Shini seized the opportunity and swung his head around to take a good nip at Trowa's backside.

"OW! Fucking hell!" yelped Trowa as he shot up, rubbing his bitten rear end. "You rotten swine of an animal!" he yelled and gave the colt a good hard smack to the neck. "Bite me, would you?! Do it again and I'll bite you back!" Trowa gave the colt another solid smack.

Quatre dissolved into fits of laughter.

Shini backed away and hung his head. When the human stopped yelling and smacking him, he pushed his muzzle forward by way of apology.

Trowa rubbed his abused backside. "No, you don't. I'm not forgiving you that easy," huffed Trowa

Shini took a step forward and pushed his muzzle against Trowa's arm, nudging gently.

"Oh, all right. You're forgiven," sighed Trowa and petted the colt.

Shini went back to eating his dinner, keeping one eye on the human just in case the opportunity for another nip should present itself. Humans really were easy creatures to control.

Having finished with Shini, Trowa stepped out, still rubbing his backside.
"You okay?" asked Quatre having finally gotten over his laughing.

"I'll live. I'd better go get Zero."

"I'll kiss it better for you later," whispered the blonde and caressed his lover's rear.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

* * *

The blackness began to recede again and Heero found it a little easier this time to fight his way through the fog that seemed to cloud his mind. The smell of antiseptic tickled his nostrils, the sounds of machines and people talking broached his ears. Forcing his eyes to open, Heero blinked as they adjusted to the bright lights of the room he was in. Confused, he tried to remember what was going on, what had happened and where was he?

"Doctor, he's coming around."

"Mr. Yuy? Can you hear me?"

Heero groaned as a dull ache made itself known in his skull. "Where am I?" he ground out. His throat was dry, tongue felt swollen and too big for his mouth.

"You're in the emergency section of Salsbury Memorial Hospital. I'm Doctor Standish," said the doctor as he quickly noted Heero's vitals.

"What happened?"

"You took a fall from a horse and knocked yourself out. Do you remember anything at all?"

Heero searched his memory - and came up blank. "No. I was riding, doing some jumps..." Heero frowned as he came up against a brick wall. "I don't remember anything after that. How bad?"

"You have concussion, Mr Yuy. You also have a dislocated collar bone and a fracture of the right humerus. The x-rays show the bone has been splintered and it will require surgery to pin and plate it back into position to heal correctly. The ultrasound of your abdomen was clear so there are no internal injuries. We also did a cat scan of your head as you took quite a blow to it. There's a large bruise on your temple and I want to rule out any damage to the brain or surrounding tissue. The results should be through in a few minutes."

"Ah."

"I've given you a shot of pethidine for the pain and that will probably be making you feel a little groggy."

"Water?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Yuy. I can't give you anything to drink. Once I have the cat scan results I want to get you up to the OR and have your arm sorted out. Nothing to drink or eat because of the anesthetic."

"Okay," Heero croaked out.

"Doctor?" the nurse interrupted. "The cat scan results are back."
"Good." Doctor Standish moved to the side of the trauma room to take a look. He frowned as he studied the pictures and then read the corresponding report. Taking a deep breath he went back to his patient, putting a smile on his face before speaking.

Heero could see there was something bothering the doctor, the smile didn't reach his eyes. "What is it?"

"The blow to the head you sustained in the fall." Standish searched for the right words. "The cat scan has shown that there is some minor bleeding and bruising of your brain. I'm not a neural expert, but from the scan and the report it would appear it's not going to be a major issue. Rest should be all it needs, that and being careful not to hit your head for the next few days. Swelling is what we need to keep an eye out for. I will do a scan each day for the next few days, precautionary measures, you see."

"Aa." Heero wasn't too sure how to take that news. His head ached despite the painkiller and he wasn't feeling completely coherent at this time.

"The OR will be ready for you in about twenty minutes. Your house mate is here. If you would like to see him I can fetch him in for you."

"Duo?"

"Yes. Doctor Maxwell got here a little while ago and is pretty anxious to see you," said Sister Clarke. "There's also a woman in the waiting room, she came in the ambulance with you."

"Relena?"

"Yes, I believe so. I can go and get her as well if you like?"

"NO!" Heero groaned as pain lanced through his head.

"Take it easy, Mr. Yuy! Remember your head injury," chastised the doctor. "I take it you don't want to see this woman?"

"No. Please, keep her away from me."

"The ambulance officer said she claimed to be your fiancée," said the doctor.

"My brain isn't that damaged, doc. No, she's not my fiancée, I don't even like the woman all that much." Heero grimaced.

"Then if it is your wish not to speak with her then we won't give out any information or allow her to see you. I'll go get Doctor Maxwell now." The sister left the room.

Heero groaned and closed his eyes. He only wanted Duo.

* * *

Relena hobbled over to the nurses’ station and cleared her throat. A young nurse looked up at her.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes. I came in via ambulance with my fiancé who took a fall from a horse. I've been waiting in the waiting room for ages and no one has come to tell me how he is or what's happening with him."

"Name?"
"Heero Yuy."

"One moment, please." The nurse tapped away at the computer keyboard. She frowned slightly when she saw the information come up on the screen. "What was your name, ma'am?"

"Relena Peacecraft."

"I'm afraid I can't give you any information at the moment."

"And why not?" Relena growled.

"You're not immediate family, nor next of kin."

"But I'm his fiancée!"

"According to the file he doesn't have a fiancée. He's single. I can only give out information on his condition to immediate family or next of kin," repeated the nurse.

"Who the hell is his next of kin then?" Relena figured if she could get that information she could contact the person and have them put straight about her relationship with Heero and be able to find out what was going on.

"His next of kin is a Doctor Duo Maxwell."

"You're joking."

"No. It says quite clearly here and on the legal papers sent through from Mr. Yuy's solicitor."

Relena turned away, her face was red and she was fuming. Tucking her crutches back under her arms she hobbled back into the waiting room to figure out what to do next. She wasn't going to let that two bit vet stand between her and finding out what Heero's condition was.

As Relena disappeared back into the waiting room, the elevator doors opened and Duo stepped out. Quickly he walked over to the nurses' station.

"I'm Doctor Duo Maxwell, Heero Yuy's next of kin. Can you tell me if he's back from having tests done yet?"

The nurse looked up and smiled at the handsome man before her. She could see the worry etched into his face, the way his hands shook a little. "I'll just check for you."

Sister Clarke walked back in just as the nurse was about to get up. "Ah, Doctor Maxwell."

"Call me, Duo."

"Sorry. Duo, Mr. Yuy is back from his tests and has woken up again. He's conscious now and asking for you. If you would come with me I'll take you through to him. Doctor Standish has the test results and would like to speak to you about those results."

"Thank you, sister." With a worried look on his face, Duo followed the sister along the corridor and into the room marked Trauma 2.

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 25

Treize hurried through to the bathroom where he washed up and then changed his clothes. He'd spoken briefly to Zechs, telling him what Duo had said about Heero. Zechs had insisted he drive Treize to the hospital, an offer Treize had declined and then been forced to accept when the vet had pointed out that Treize had partaken of a strong scotch. While he was by no means inebriated the last thing he needed was for a police car to pull him over for a random breath test. Reluctantly, Treize had agreed.

While Treize was getting changed, Zechs made a call to Oakford. His shift had almost finished anyway and after explaining to the head vet what his plans were and what had occurred with the client's horse, the head vet agreed to let Zechs knock off early on the proviso that Zechs made up the missing half hour on the following day. Zechs agreed.

Treize emerged, freshened up, wearing a pair of black slacks and gray shirt with a sports jacket hung over his arm. It was all Zechs could do not to drool. The hungry look didn't go astray, Treize noticed and hoped he hadn't misread those looks.

"I'm ready," Treize said softly.

"Then let's go," replied Zechs as he stood up and followed Treize out of the house.

Treize locked up and then climbed into the passenger side of the vet's vehicle. "Do you mind if we just stop off at the stable block on the way out? I'd like to let Otto know where I will be in case he needs me for anything."

"No problem." Zechs started the car and drove slowly down the driveway that would take them to the main road via the stables. He pulled up by the courtyard entrance.

"I'll only be a moment," said Treize as he got out and disappeared into the stable complex.

Zechs kept the motor running, turning the heater on to dispel the chill of the early evening air that was beginning to infiltrate.

Treize spoke briefly with Otto, letting the groom know he was heading to the hospital to see Heero. He promised to call and let Otto know how Heero was once he'd gotten the details himself. Otto informed him that the backhoe had been dispatched to the paddock and that Taurus' body had been buried. Treize thanked the groom, unable to talk much about the chestnut as the wound was still raw. Treize would come to terms with his grief at losing the horse, but it would take time.

Having concluded his business in the stables, Treize returned to the car and Zechs slipped it into gear. They rode in companionable silence for a while before Zechs broke the quiet by asking Treize subtle questions such as: How long had he been riding? How long had he known Heero for? The questions were answered easily enough, Treize beginning to relax a bit in the company of the vet. Zechs then took the questions a step further. What sort of music did Treize enjoy? What sort of movies did he like to watch? What foods were his favorites?

Treize had a pretty good feeling that the vet was fishing for information, but in a not so noticeable way and he had to admire the man for that. He answered the questions and even asked some of his own. The answers he got confirmed his suspicions that the vet was interested in him.
By the time they were pulling into the hospital car park, they had a date for the following Wednesday night.

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Sister Clarke led Duo down the corridor to Trauma 2. Duo could see Heero lying on the bed, wires and tubes connected to his body and he had to bite his lip. The anguish he felt threatened to bubble over and he couldn't afford to break down now. He had to be strong for Heero. Gritting his teeth and squaring his shoulders, Duo followed the sister inside.

"Ah, Doctor Maxwell," greeted Doctor Standish. "Mr. Yuy is awake and I'm sure you wish to speak to him. Come over here and I'll give you a couple of minutes with him before I explain the extent of his injuries and what we propose to do."

"Thank you." Duo stepped forward, the lump in his throat getting bigger by the second. Then he was beside the bed and looking into half closed, clouded cobalt. "Heero?"

Heero opened his eyes a little wider and peered out through his bangs. "Duo?"

"Oh god, Heero." It took a mighty effort on Duo's part not to wrap his arms around his lover and kiss away all the pain. There was nothing he wanted to do more than hold his love, reassure Heero that everything was going to be all right. He raised a hand to Heero's forehead instead and brushed back the dark locks. Tears welled in his eyes but Duo blinked them back and tried to force the lump from his throat. Gazing over Heero's injured body, Duo could see the twist to Heero's broken upper right arm, the swelling and darkening bruises making their presence known. Heero's shoulder was also sitting uncomfortably, the dislocated collar bone being the cause of that.

"Doctor Maxwell, if I could have a moment of your time to explain what we wish to do for Mr. Yuy and get your signature of consent on the forms?"

Duo turned to see Doctor Standish at his elbow. "Of course."

"Once the formalities are taken care of you may sit with Mr Yuy until it's time for him to go up to surgery."

"Thanks."

Doctor Standish led Duo to the side of the room. "The humerus splintered when it broke, we're going to need to operate to pin and plate it back into place so it can heal properly. We will also put the collar bone back in place while he's under the anesthetic."

"The concussion? What did the cat scan show?"

"The scan shows some very minor bleeding inside Mr. Yuy's skull. His brain is also slightly bruised and we need to keep an eye on that to make sure no swelling occurs. There shouldn't be a problem but it pays to keep an eye on it. I need your signature on the surgery forms for us to be able to operate. Normally I would have Mr. Yuy do it as he's conscious and lucid, however, he's physically unable to do so and as his next of kin we can accept your signature to confirm his verbal consent."

Duo quickly read over the form, it was a standard form, similar to the ones he used for his animal patients. Picking up the pen, he signed the bottom of the page and handed the form back. "Anything else?"

"No. That's all for now, Doctor Maxwell. The orderly will be down in about fifteen minutes to take Mr Yuy up to the OR. I have other patients to see and there isn't anything more we can do for Mr.
Yuy down here. I'll leave you to sit with him until it's time to take him up. Sister Clarke will keep an eye on you and if you should need anything in the meantime, just press the buzzer over there." Doctor Standish pointed to the call button located above the bed Heero was lying on.

"Thanks, doc. I appreciate all you've done for him."

"My pleasure, Doctor Maxwell, it's what I'm here for." Turning, Doctor Standish picked up the paperwork and stopped by Heero. "Good luck, young man. I'll check on you tomorrow up in the ward."

"Thanks," Heero managed to get out around his dry mouth.

Doctor Standish left, leaving Heero, Duo and Sister Clarke in the room. The sister checked over Heero's vitals again and adjusted the saline drip flow. Finished with her checks, she turned to the patient. "Are you comfortable?"

"As comfortable as I can be," replied Heero.

The sister smiled and patted Heero's left arm. "I'm going to give you a pre-med now. I'll put it through the drip tube, no sense in sticking you with a needle when we don't have to," she said and went to the cabinets at the side, returning moment later with the drug and injecting it into the cannula attached to the saline drip. "That should start to kick in very shortly. You'll start to feel drowsy, but that's all."

Duo watched the proceedings from the side, patiently waiting for the sister to leave so he could have a few minutes of quality time with Heero before he disappeared to surgery.

"I'm all finished here now," said Sister Clarke as she dropped the syringe into the bin and the needle into the sharps box. "I'll come back once the orderly arrives at the desk." Pausing, Sister Clarke looked from Duo to Heero and back again. When she next spoke, her voice was low. "I think he could do with a hug," she said to Duo, a knowing look on her face. "I'll close the blinds on the window to give you two some privacy. I'll also put a sign on the door to keep people out."

Duo's eyes widened in shock, then softened at the sister's understanding and acceptance. "How did you know?"

She smiled again. "The look in your eyes, your body language around him and the way you speak about him. Don't worry, I won't say anything and I don't condemn you either. Personally, I think it's sweet."

"Sister, I wish there were more open minded people like you," said Duo with a warm smile.

"The world might be a better place if people weren't so narrow minded and bigoted about a lot of things," she replied. "Go and be with him, he needs you. I'll knock when I come back with the orderly."

Before the sister could leave, Duo grabbed her hand and raised it to his lips. He kissed the back of it before letting it go. "Thank you, sister."

"You're welcome." Sister Clarke moved to the window and pulled the blind closed before exiting the room and leaving the pair alone.

Duo moved quickly back to the side of the bed and took Heero's hand in his own, his thumb caressed the back of it while his eyes gazed lovingly into Heero's. "How are you really feeling?"
"Like I went ten rounds with King Kong, and lost."

Duo chuckled. "If it's any consolation, you look like it too."

"Thanks a bunch."

Duo's voice turned serious as he leaned in close and placed a tender kiss to Heero's lips. "You scared the shit outta me, Heero. When Treize called and said you'd had a bad fall, well..." Duo's voice began to break as the tears filled his eyes again.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to be worried."

"Not your fault," Duo ground out, forcing the tears away. There would be time for that later, when he was home and didn't need to be strong for Heero.

"I don't remember what happened."

"What do you remember?"

"I was in the jumping paddock." Heero's brows knitted together as he scanned his memory for any scrap he could find. "I was working Taurus and we were doing some slightly harder courses on him. He went really well, clearing everything and listening to me as he should. The next thing I remember is waking up in the ambulance, although that's a bit foggy. My next clearest memory is being in here."

As Heero spoke, Duo moved closer, his hand still caressing Heero's while the other gently ran over Heero's forehead.

"What happened, Duo?"

That was what Duo had been dreading. He really didn't want to explain to Heero the circumstances of the fall and the resulting aftermath; Heero had a right to know though, but was this the right time to tell him? Duo had to do some quick thinking. How much did he tell Heero?

"Duo? Can you tell me what happened?" Heero's words were a little slow, his voice thick as the pre-med began to kick in.

"I don't really know all the details, Heero. Treize filled me in a little when I got to the stables just after the ambulance had left."

"Tell me what you can, it doesn't matter how much, but I have to know, Duo. It's driving me nuts here."

Duo swallowed and tried to comply with Heero's request without lying. "Treize told me that Taurus bolted, you tried to stop him, turn him, anything to bring him back under control, but Taurus didn't listen. He tried to jump the paddock gate and fell. You were thrown clear but hit the road and then a tree."

Heero closed his eyes for a moment, desperately searching his mind for any memory of the fall. He found nothing. "Why would Taurus have bolted though? He'd been working so well and listening to me. Something must have caused him to bolt and it would have had to be something pretty frightening." Heero voiced his thoughts. He'd been around horses long enough to know that they didn't bolt for no reason. And if Taurus had ignored every effort on Heero's part to stop him, as Duo said, then the horse must have been really spooked.
"Oh shit. How to explain this one?" Duo could feel the anger rising again when he thought of Relena.

"Duo?" Heero could see the flare of rage in Duo's eyes. "What caused Taurus to bolt? And how is he?"

Fuck, fuck and double fuck! With Heero due to go down to surgery very shortly, Duo didn't want him to be upset, but he couldn't see any way out of the question. With a sigh he decided to tell Heero the truth, well, about Relena anyway and hopefully he could avoid answering the question about Taurus' health until Heero had gotten over his trip to the OR.

"You're hiding something," said Heero as he studied his lover's face.

Meeting Heero's eyes with his own, Duo began to explain what had happened. "Treize tells me that Relena was in the jumping paddock as well. She was watching you work Taurus. Apparently she got bored when you two went up to the far end of the paddock and she decided to follow you. Taurus didn't like the look of her coming up the paddock on her crutches."

"Aa."

"Mind you, I don't blame him for taking off at the sight of her. What creature in their right mind would want to hang around when that pink parasite is out and about? Just one look is enough to scare the spots of a leopard." Duo knew he was running off at the mouth, but he was trying to lighten the mood a little as well as distract Heero from Taurus and the horse's fate.

Heero wasn't fooled for a moment. He knew there was more to this than Duo was telling him and he wanted to know it all. Duo was evading the questions and Heero had to try and get him to spill somehow. "Taurus took fright at Relena?"

"Yeah."

"Duo?"

"Yes, Heero?"

"You said Taurus tried to jump the paddock gate and fell."

"Yeah, he did. You pitched over his shoulder and ended up against the trunk of a tree. I'd say that's what caused the fracture and dislocation."

"Duo? You haven't said what happened to Taurus."

Shit! Duo knew he had to tell Heero, there was no avoiding it. Heero knew there was something up and like a dog with a bone, he wouldn't let go until he had the truth. "Taurus, he, he hit the ground pretty hard."

"And?"

"I didn't treat him, Treize called a vet from Oakford. I'm pretty sure it was Zechs who attended."

"Duo? I know you too well. There's no way you would have left a injured animal without doing something for it, regardless of whether or not you'd been called in to treat it. Please, tell me. I have to know, Duo."

Duo sighed and slumped. Moving closer to Heero, he kissed his boyfriend tenderly and then pulled back just a little. He couldn't look Heero in the eye. "When he connected with the ground his head
must have hit the roadway. His muzzle was crushed in."

Heero gave a soft gasp.

"But that wasn't all. His forelegs, when he landed they didn't take his weight properly. He broke the left forearm bone, twisted it and severed the muscles in the upper forearm. He also had numerous lacerations to the hind legs."

"Oh god. What...?"

"I gave him a painkiller before I left to come here. Treize had called Oakford and as you know with the vet board code of practice, one vet cannot treat another vet's patient without permission from the other vet. As it was I was breaking the rules by giving him the painkiller." Duo hoped that Heero wouldn't ask any more questions, that he would leave it there and accept that Duo had left before Taurus had been treated and therefore wouldn't know what had happened as far as Taurus' fate was concerned.

Heero wasn't stupid. He had a pretty good idea of what would have happened to Taurus. Whether Duo knew the fate of the animal or not, he wasn't sure. Broken legs in horses were extremely difficult to treat, involving plaster casts, slings to keep the animal off the broken limb and a lot of time and effort. Even then there was no guarantee that the bone would heal and the horse would always be weak on that leg, that's assuming it didn't die from shock. For the shock reason alone most times the horse was put down. With Taurus being a showjumper a broken leg was the same as a death sentence.

"Do you know what happened to him?" Heero whispered.

Duo swallowed, Heero could see the pain in those violet eyes and knew his assumptions would be correct. He just needed Duo to confirm it. He decided to give the vet the easy way out.

"He's been put down, hasn't he?"

Duo slowly raised his eyes to meet Heero's. "Yes. There wouldn't have been anything anyone could have done for him, Heero. Not just the leg, but the muzzle too. It was the kindest thing to do." Duo's voice hitched as he spoke.

Heero lay in silence, mind churning. A soft sob escaped his lips. "He didn't deserve that," he breathed.

"I know," replied Duo and kissed his lover again. "I'm so sorry, Heero."

"That bitch."

"Huh?" Duo lifted his head a little and gazed curiously at Heero.

"Relena. This is all her fault. I've tried time and time again to tell her I'm not interested in her or her advances. It's her stupid obsession that's responsible for this," Heero snarled.

Duo took a step back for a moment. This was a side of Heero he very rarely saw. While he had his own reasons for hating Relena and knew his boyfriend wasn't keen on her either, he didn't think Heero would be this vengeful. "Heero, calm down. What's done is done, as horrible and sad as it is, we cannot change that."

"I know. And that's what hurts the most. She's going to get away with the death of a good horse."
"She won't get away with it, Heero."

Heero fixed his gaze back onto his boyfriend and noticed the anger in those violet eyes.

"Once I catch up with her I will be letting her know exactly what her actions have done. Not just to Taurus but to you too."

"Duo, remember one thing, it's twenty-five years for murder."

Duo shook his head, the anger leaving him momentarily. "What a time for you to get a sense of humor, Heero."

"I don't want to be separated from you, Duo. I don't think I could handle it if you were locked up, especially on account of that selfish woman."

"Don't worry. As much as I would love to slip her a dose of the green dream, I won't. I do not make any apology though for thinking about it."

The knowledge of Taurus having had to be put down weighed heavily on Heero's mind and he wished he could remember exactly what had happened. Had he tried hard enough to stop the chestnut? Had he tried to turn him?

"Oh no, you don't, buddy." Duo could see the emotions flickering through Heero's eyes and knew exactly what was going on in his lover's head. "You did everything you could to stop that horse. This was not your fault, you couldn't stop him, even Treize couldn't have stopped him if what he said was true." Knowing that the orderly would be there to take Heero to the OR in a few minutes, Duo was determined that Heero wouldn't depart wondering if it was his fault.

Gently, careful of Heero's injuries and the drip, Duo squeezed himself onto the side of the small bed and wrapped his arms around Heero's bruised and battered frame. He held his lover close, whispering endearments into Heero's ear, stroking one hand softly against Heero's back and then kissing him.

***

Relena was getting angrier by the minute. So far she hadn't been able to come up with a way of finding out what was happening with her Heero. She was frustrated and majorly annoyed that a cheap vet should be Heero's next of kin. Heaving herself out of the chair again, she pushed the crutches under her arms and began to limp out towards the nurses' station. She needed to find a toilet. As she approached she couldn't help but pick up on the tail end of a conversation a nurse was having on the 'phone.

"...That's fine, send the orderly down now then. Come to the nurses' station first though, you will need to speak with Sister Clarke as she has all the details on Mr. Yuy. Yes, the patient is in Trauma 2. Thank you." The nurse hung up and turned to Relena. "Can I help you?"

"Ah, yes. I need the bathroom."

"Just go down that corridor there, take the first right and the bathroom is half way down on the left."

"Thank you." Relena began to hobble away, her mind working overtime. Heero was in Trauma 2. As she moved down the corridor so she took note of the surroundings, reading the signs on the doors as she passed them. 'Drug Room', 'Doctors Lounge', 'Trauma 3'. She passed by each one searching for the one she wanted. Arriving at the first right, Relena turned and spotted the sign for the bathroom up ahead. Moving down the corridor she glanced from side to side.
Bingo.

Trauma 2.

She slowed her hobbling as she neared the door and then frowned when she noted the blind was closed. With the frown still in place she began to hobble towards the bathroom again. She really needed to go. She could stop at the trauma room on her way back and see how her Heero was doing.

Finished with the call of nature, Relena washed her hands and headed back out. As she approached the Trauma room she noticed that the blind wasn't completely closed in one spot. Not wanting to walk in on the wrong patient, Relena snuck up to the window and squinted as she peered inside.

Her jaw hit the floor.

Despite the small space she had to look through, she could clearly see what was happening inside that small room. Her Heero was lying prone on the hospital bed with that, that cheap, no good, two bit vet taking advantage of him!

Kissing him!

Her Heero!

Relena's rage swelled inside, completely blind to anything other than the fact that that long haired, creature was kissing her Heero. He was a male, dammit! One male shouldn't be kissing another male!

Relena's mind began to work overtime, twisting and turning what she had seen. She'd always known there was something funny about that vet. The fact that he had such long hair wasn't normal to start with, and now... He was a queer, a fairy, and he was corrupting her Heero!

Had Relena looked closer she would have seen Heero kissing back with just as much passion, noticed his lips working over Duo's neck, but no. She only saw what she wanted to see and that was Duo forcing himself and his faggot tendencies on her fiancé!

With a gasp, Relena pulled back from the window and pressed against the wall. The anger tore through her, rage bubbling inside. She had to save her Heero, had to stop that excuse for a male from corrupting her future husband, but how to do it?

The sounds of approaching people drew her back to the here and now and she looked around quickly for somewhere to hide. Remembering that the bathroom was just behind her, she quickly hobbled back to it and slipped inside. She kept the door open a crack and watched intently as a nursing sister and orderly stopped outside the trauma room and knocked.

* * *

Duo continued to kiss his lover, lips playing softly over Heero's as he did the only thing he could think of to ease Heero's pain and feeling of guilt. He didn't notice Relena peering through the crack in the blinds, his concentration was fixed solely on his partner. A soft knock to the door alerted him that Sister Clarke was back.

Reluctantly pulling away, Duo smoothed down the hospital blanket and then tugged his shirt into place. "Come in," he called softly.

Sister Clarke entered, followed by a cheerful looking man in blue scrubs. "It's time for Mr. Yuy to go up to the OR," she said quietly.
"Okay."

With a warm smile, the sister moved to check Heero's vitals again, noting them down on his chart. "How are you feeling, Mr. Yuy?"

"Groggy," replied Heero.

"Good. The pre-med is working. Sebastian here is going to take you up to the OR where the surgeons are waiting for you."

Sebastian gave a smile as he moved to the bed and checked that everything that should be attached was attached. He double checked he had the chart and anything else that needed to go up with the patient before releasing the brakes on the wheels.

Duo stepped forward as Sebastian prepared to wheel Heero from the trauma room. He rested his hand against Heero's cheek and leaned close to whisper in his ear. "I'll be right here waiting for you, Heero."

"Thanks. Duo?"

Duo leaned in closer.

"I love you."

"Love you too, Heero." Duo stepped back as Sebastian began to wheel Heero and the bed away.

As Heero departed so Duo let his facade drop. His shoulders slumped and an overwhelming tiredness swept over him. A gentle touch to his arm reminded him that Sister Clarke was still in the room.

"Duo? I have to finish up a couple of things relating to Mr. Yuy and take them to the OR. I won't be long and as soon as I'm finished I'll come back down to get you and take you up to the OR waiting room."

"Thanks. I'll head out to the waiting room down here then and wait in there for you."

"Okay. I'll come and get you shortly." Sister Clarke left the trauma room and headed back out to the nurses' station and then the OR, leaving Duo alone for a few minutes to regain his composure.

Straightening himself up and taking a deep breath, Duo quickly smoothed down his shirt and ran a hand through his disheveled bangs. With a sigh he stepped towards the door and out into the corridor.

"You bastard."

~ * ~

tbc...

[1] Green dream: This is the slang term applied to the drug Lethabarb which is used to put animals to sleep.
Chapter 26

"You bastard!"

Duo spun around as he heard the low hiss of words. His eyes widened and then narrowed when he saw Relena standing there.

Relena had watched Heero being taken from the trauma room, seen the sister depart and then stepped out of the bathroom and into the hall. As she began to hobble along so the door to the trauma room opened again and the long haired vet stepped out. All Relena's fury welled at once and she couldn't help herself. Before her was the one thing that stood between her and her Heero. Quickly she hobbled forward, intent on letting this creature know exactly what she thought of him.

"You bastard," she hissed. When he turned around to face her, she raised her hand and slapped him hard across the cheek.

Duo flinched as the sting of the slap registered, automatically his own hand came up to retaliate and he only just managed to stop himself from punching the woman in the jaw. Instead, he swore at her.

"You bitch!"

"How dare you! How dare you corrupt my Heero with your fairy ways. You're nothing but a low down pansy; a faggot. I should have known it was you that was keeping him away from me, denying him the chance to have a proper relationship with the woman he loves. You're nothing but a perverted, stinking dog!" Relena raised her hand to slap Duo again.

Duo was a little quicker off the mark and caught the woman's wrist before she had a chance to connect with his face again. His hand tightened around delicate bones as he pushed her away from him. His anger boiled over and Duo saw red. The fear, the rage, hatred and pain all welled up inside him and like a volcano, he erupted.

"You fucking piece of shit! What gives you the right to judge me? You don't even know me, you pink piece of crap. I've come across some delusional people in my time, lady, but you, you take the cake."

"You have no right to speak to me like that, you queer! I'm not the one that has a problem here, it's you. How could you?! Forcing yourself on my fiancé, pushing your evil, filthy ways on to him? You're disgusting!"

"I'm disgusting?! You want to take a fucking good hard look at yourself, Miss prim and proper. And as for Heero being your fiancé, don't make me puke! Heero doesn't love you, he won't ever love you, he doesn't even like you and if you were to get your starry eyed head out of your fucking ass for long enough, maybe you would see that." Duo didn't care anymore. Woman or not, this pink menace had finally pushed him over the edge and all the pent up rage burst forth.

"You are nothing more than a gutter rat. Putting your dirty, fairy hands all over Heero. It isn't natural, two men do not belong together, it's sick and twisted. And you're the lowest of the low, you pervert. You should be locked up!" Relena went to pound a fist against Duo's chest but was brought up short by a stinging slap to her own cheek.

"You cow!" Duo couldn't control himself any more. The woman's words tore into his very soul and before he knew it, he'd slapped her good and hard to the cheek. "Don't you dare stand there and
condemn me. There is nothing wrong with loving someone, same sex or not and that's where you let your- self down, you bitch. I love Heero and he loves me. I love him for who he is, not what he is. Our love is not sick or twisted, it's genuine and pure."

"You'll pay for that, you pansy assed freak. You're not a man, you're just a sorry excuse for a human being. For a start no proper man wears his hair that long. Heero would never love you, he's not gay, he's just confused by you and the way you're trying to get into his pants. You're lower than the worms."

Duo couldn't help it, he laughed. Turning his purple eyes towards the woman that had tormented him for weeks now, his eyes glittered and his face twisted into a sneer. "Let me tell you something, Miss know it all. Heero was the one that wanted to get into my pants. I was the one that baulked, kept putting him off. You're deluded, Heero's as gay as the pope is catholic, and you know what? I don't give a flying fuck what you think. Heero knows what he wants, he holds no illusions about life and society. He wants me, not you and I love him. Why don't you take a fucking long, hard look around you and face the facts, you pink menace."

Relena drew herself up to her full height, balancing on her crutches as best she could. Her eyes narrowed and her look became calculating. "You prick. You're just jealous and trying to twist the truth around to suit yourself. I know your kind, luring innocent men into your clutches and once you've had enough of them or gotten what you can out of them you just cast them aside. Well, I've got news for you, you're not going to do it to my Heero!"

"Your Heero? Since when has Heero ever said he wanted you?"

"He was going to take me out to dinner, he'd already arranged to pick me up. I know he was planning on proposing to me and now you've gone and ruined it all," snarled Relena.

"I don't know what planet you're on but it certainly isn't Earth! Heero would never ask you out to dinner and he as sure as hell wouldn't ask you to marry him!"

"Yes, he was. You can ask Treize," Relena replied smugly. "And now, you, you go and try to corrupt him with your filthy ways. Perverts like you should be castrated and hung out to dry, preying on innocent men."

"You fucking moron. You just don't get it, do you?! You're so wrapped up in yourself you can't see the forest for the trees." Duo had no reason to question Heero's love for him. He knew the dark haired rider loved him unconditionally and he wasn't about to stand here and be insulted and not give back as good as he was getting.

"I can see that he has talents in the riding world that he's never going to achieve while you're trying to get your faggoty paws on him!" Relena fired.

"At least I didn't cause his accident!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Think about it, bitch. This is all your fault. Because of you and your ridiculous obsession, my boyfriend is now lying on an operating table undergoing surgery to fix a broken arm. Not only that, but you could have cost him the chance to achieve his dream of riding for his country. And if that wasn't enough, you're also responsible for the death of a fine horse, one that had the ability to be a top animal. Well, I hope you're proud of yourself, princess. I'd ask you if your conscience lets you sleep at night knowing the pain you've caused, but selfish, self obsessed pieces of shit like you don't have one."
"I might have known that someone of your intelligence level would try to pin the blame for Heero's accident on an innocent party."

Duo slapped a hand against his forehead. "I don't believe this. Not even you could be that thick not to see what you did! Talk about living in a fantasy world. You seriously need to get a life, one away from my boyfriend!"

As the argument progressed, so did the level of their voices. So far they'd kept it at hisses and snarled words, now though, the volume began to rise as tempers got the better of both parties.

"He's not your boyfriend, faggot!"

"If he isn't then why is he living with me? Why is he sharing my bed?"

"Because he hasn't had the chance to escape you and your pansy ways. But that's all going to change," snapped Relena.

"I don't think so. Once Heero's well enough to leave this hospital he'll be coming back home with me so you might as well get used to it and leave him alone. He's mine, bitch, and I'm not about to let you sink your stinking claws into him!"

"Bastard! I can see that Heero needs to be with me. I can take care of him, give him what he needs. I'm a woman, I can have his children. You're nothing but a two bit, country vet that couldn't even clip a dog’s claws properly."

Duo drew in a sharp breath. That stung! "Maybe you can give Heero children, but what makes you think he wants kids? Besides, I have something you could never give him."

"What? A tight asshole to fuck?"

That did it. Duo lost the shred of control he was grimly hanging onto. Fists clenched, eyes sparked with fury and his lip curled feraly. Leaning in towards Relena, Duo let fly.

"You fucking cow! If you had one scrap of sanity in that tiny pea brain of yours you'd see Heero for who he is, a human being, a man with a big heart, generous soul and a love of life. But that's asking too much of you. All you can see is Heero as another of your studs, a prize to add to your stable, nothing more than a breeding machine, a sperm bank. Sure, you can probably give him top horses to ride, the best in equipment, all the monetary things, but you could never give him what I can. I give him love, support and freedom, unconditional and unquestioned. I gave him my heart. You could never do that, you love yourself way too much to want to share. I pity you."

"Why, you mongrel!" Relena balanced herself on her feet and suddenly swung at Duo with one of her crutches.

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Zechs pulled into the hospital parking area and began to look for a place to park. He spotted Duo's car but had to ride around a bit more before locating a spot further away that he would have liked. Cutting the engine the pair got out and began to walk swiftly to the emergency entrance of the hospital.

"Do you think they're both still down here?" asked Zechs as they approached the sliding doors.

"Knowing the speed at which the emergency department moves, I'd say it's a fairly good bet. When I brought Relena down for x-rays after the show a couple of weeks ago we had to wait a good two
hours before we were seen by a doctor," replied Treize.

"Gotta love the health system," muttered Zechs. "You wouldn't want to come in with life threatening injuries, now, would you? By the time they get around to seeing you, you could be a corpse."

Treize couldn't help it, he laughed.

"You should do that more often," said Zechs softly. "It suits you."

Treize lowered his eyes, a pink hue spreading over his cheeks. Suddenly his face turned serious again. "I wonder if Relena is still here? Shit! I hope not, or at least if she is, she's staying out of Duo's way."

"Trouble?" queried Zechs as they passed through the first set of sliding doors.

"With a capital T. I'll give you the short version later."

"Okay."

The pair stepped through the second set of doors and entered the foyer of the emergency department, and froze.

"Security! Someone call security now!" a voice yelled from their left.

The sounds of a heated argument hit their ears and both Treize and Zechs turned to face each other.

"Relena!" stated Treize, recognizing the woman's high pitched voice.

"Duo!" responded Zechs. He'd know that swearing tone anywhere.

"Fuck!" they said in unison and took off at a run in the direction of the argument.

***

Sister Clarke delivered the last of the paper work on Heero Yuy to the OR and wished the man good luck. Humming softly to herself, she took a quick look inside the OR waiting room, noting it was empty and then headed back to the elevator to go fetch Duo and bring him up. She smiled to herself as she recalled the handsome animal doctor. He really was a charmer and it was obvious he was very much in love with his partner.

The elevator doors opened and she stepped inside, pushing the button for the ground floor where the emergency department was located. She saw a lot of trauma in her job as one of the supervising sisters of the department. She'd witnessed fear, death, the atrocities of what one human could do to another and she'd seen her fair share of miracles too. It could be heartbreaking some times and very rewarding at other times.

Stepping out of the elevator, she immediately began to head for the waiting room when she heard the sounds of raised voices and a heated argument coming from down one of the corridors. One of the voices sounded a little familiar. Changing direction, Sister Clarke went to investigate.

Rounding the corner the sight that greeted her stunned her for a moment. Standing in the corridor was the man she knew as Duo and that woman that claimed to be Mr. Yuy's fiancé. They were engaged in an increasingly vocal slanging match. Sister Clarke was about to approach and try to diffuse the situation when she saw the woman raise one of her crutches and swing at Duo. A loud crack was heard as the crutch connected with the vet's leg. Instantly Sister Clarke was running,
calling for security as she ran.

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Relena raised the crutch and swung at Duo. Unfortunately, Duo didn't have any room to move and dodge the blow. It landed with a crunch against his shin.

"You fucking bitch!" Duo snarled and rubbed the abused shin for a moment as the pain throbbed through his lower leg. When Relena raised the crutch again for a second blow, he retaliated. His hand came up sharply and punched the woman in the upper arm causing her to falter. Quickly, Duo wrestled the crutch from Relena before she could have another go at him. "I've a good mind to shove this crutch where the sun don't shine, only we'd probably lose it forever if I did!" he growled.

"You bastard! Hit me would you? I'm going to have you up on an assault charge, I'll sue you for every damn cent I can get, I'll ruin you!"

A calm voice broke into their argument. "I don't think so."

The warring parties paused to look at who had spoken, at the same time, Treize and Zechs came running around the corner.

"Relena!"

"Duo!"

"He hit me, the bastard," screamed Relena and lunged at Duo, intent on inflicting as much damage as she could. Her nails caught against the skin of Duo's cheek as the vet tried to dodge out of her way. Before she could sink her nails in properly, a pair of arms grabbed her from behind and pinned her own arms to her sides. She wriggled, screamed and kicked frantically. "Let me go! That pervert is going to pay for trying to take my Heero!"

"Bitch!" snarled Duo as he raised a hand to his cheek, his fingers coming away slightly bloody from the scratches. A hand to his arm drew him from his target and he spotted Zechs standing beside him for the first time, body stance indicating he was ready to grab Duo to prevent further physical violence should the need arise. At the same time, Duo heard Relena's cursing change and saw she was firmly held in Treize's arms, the poor man looked like he was copping a bit of a beating though.

"Relena, calm down," said Treize in a tone he usually used when quieting a nervous horse.

"That sorry excuse for a human being hit me!"

"You fucking hit me first, cow!" retorted Duo. "It was self defense!"

"Bullshit! I'll have your ass in court so fast you'll wonder what hit you!"

"You have nothing to charge me with, pink piece of crap!"

"Assault to start with, corrupting my fiancé with your perverted ways."

"What the fuck are you going on about, woman? I didn't assault you, you fucking hit me! And the last time I checked being gay wasn't a crime. Besides, I haven't corrupted Heero, he's gay too and we're both legally consenting adults and why the fuck am I explaining myself to *you*?!"

"ENOUGH!"

Relena shut her mouth on the next comment she was about to say, Duo also bit back a retort when he
realized that Sister Clarke was standing there with her arms crossed and a decidedly annoyed look on her face.

"That is quite enough out of the pair of you," Sister Clarke began. "In case you had forgotten, this is a hospital, we have sick and injured patients here and they would appreciate a little peace and quiet."

"Sorry, sister," muttered Duo.

Relena continued to glare at the vet. Treize had released his hold on her but remained at her side. "Bastard," she hissed again.

"I said, that is enough!" reprimanded the sister and turned her full attention to Relena. "You will leave this hospital immediately. You have no reason to be here."

"But, Heero... My fiancé is here."

"He's not your fiancé, you deluded pink menace!"

"Duo," Zechs warned. The glare Sister Clarke gave the vet added weight to Zechs' warning and Duo promptly shut up.

"That bastard hit me and I intend to take him to court and press charges for assault!"

Narrowing her eyes, Sister Clarke homed in on the young woman. "If that's what you intend to do, then fine, go ahead and press your charges, but I warn you, I saw the whole incident and I'm more than willing to testify in court on Doctor Maxwell's behalf that it was self defense."

Relena glared, Duo smirked.

"Now, as I said before, it's time for you to leave, you have no business here."

"But, Heero..."

"Mr. Yuy is currently in theater. Doctor Maxwell here is Mr. Yuy's next of kin and power of attorney. Both Doctor Maxwell and Mr. Yuy have expressed their wish that you do not come anywhere near either of them..."

"Heero would never say that," Relena snapped.

"Mr. Yuy's explicit instructions were that you not be allowed into his room or anywhere near him while he is a patient in this hospital."

"He must have suffered worse injuries to his head than first thought if he can't remember me and what happened," said Relena, her voice wavering. "My poor baby, I have to be with him, he needs me more than ever now."

"I think you may have to call for the men in white coats, sister," Duo muttered.

"I'm beginning to think that myself," replied the sister as she eyed the woman before her. "She's certainly got an obsession about your partner, Doctor Maxwell."

"Tell me about it. She's the reason Heero's in here in the first place."

"Oh?"

"I'll explain later," replied Duo as he noticed Relena beginning to work herself up to another round.
At that moment, two burly security guards came around the corner. "Someone call for security?" asked the one as they hurried over.

"I did, about five minutes ago," replied Sister Clarke. "About time you got here."

"Sorry."

Sister Clarke gave a sigh. "It's okay, things seem to be under control for the moment. But don't go too far away, I may need you to escort someone from the premises."

"Right."

Sister Clarke turned back to the group. "I'll give you the choice, Miss. You can either leave the hospital now, under your own steam or I can have the security guards escort you. It's your choice."

"But... Heero..."

"Mr. Yuy is a patient of this hospital and I repeat, he doesn't not wish to see you. Now, what's it to be? Go by yourself or have these gentlemen escort you out?"

"Come on, Relena," coaxed Treize. "I'll take you out and run you home." Then it dawned on Treize, he didn't have his car, he'd come in Zechs' car. "Shit! I don't have my car."

"I can call a cab, Mr...?" said Sister Clarke.

"Khushrenada, Treize Khushrenada. I'm Heero Yuy's employer, I was there when the accident happened."

"Ah. I can call a cab for you, if you wish?"

Seeing that Relena was not about to make any move to leave voluntarily, Treize took over. "Yes, if you don't mind, sister, a cab would be appreciated."

"I'll organize one for you."

"Thank you." Treize turned to Duo and Zechs. "I'll take Relena home in a cab and come back in my own car, if that's okay?"

Zechs looked a little disappointed that Treize was leaving, but the man said he would be back. Zechs would have loaned Treize his car, but with the amount and type of drugs and equipment he carried in the vehicle it was too much of an insurance risk.

"Fine with me. The sooner that cow is out of here the better. You're welcome to come back though, Treize. I know Heero will want to see you once he's up to it," said Duo as he gave Relena a sneer.

"Can I trust you not to start fighting and arguing again while I go and call that cab?" asked Sister Clarke.

"We will make sure they behave themselves," replied Zechs with a soft smile.

"I'll be right back then."

* * *

"Ah, Mr. Yuy. I'm Doctor Phelps and I will be doing the operation to fix your arm."
"Hi doc," Heero managed to get out with a dry tongue and mouth that felt like it was full of cotton.

"This is Doctor Wolfe and he will be the anesthetist. In a moment he's going to ask you some questions and then we will take you through into the theater and prep you for surgery. While you're under the anesthetic I will put your collar bone back into place and then pin and plate the humerus bone in your arm. When you wake up you will be in a plaster cast from the shoulder to the elbow to restrict any movement of the upper arm while the bone knits back together. You're going to be a bit sore for a while so let us know when you're in any pain and we will control that with the appropriate pain medication. Do you have any questions?"

"Aa. How long will I be in plaster for?"

"About six to eight weeks, depending on how the fracture heals."

"How long before I can ride again?"

The doctor made a 'tsking' noise. "You horse people, you're all the same. Wanting to know when you can get back into the saddle again. It won't be for a few weeks. It all depends on the severity of the injured bone and I won't know exactly how much damage has been done until I operate. X-rays only show so much. I'll be able to let you know better once the operation is finished."

"Thanks."

"Now, if there are no more questions, I'll leave you with Doctor Wolfe and go finish getting scrubbed up. I'll see you inside." Doctor Phelps left and Doctor Wolfe took over.

Heero answered the anesthetist’s questions as best he could and was relieved when they finally wheeled him into the theater. He was lifted from his bed and placed on the operating table. Doctor Wolfe appeared in his line of vision once more and smiled through his mask.

"I'm going to give you the anesthetic now. Count backwards for me from ten to one."

"Ten, nine, eight..." Heero slipped into unconsciousness.

"He's out, Phelps."

"Good. Scalpel."

* * *

Treize managed to half carry, half drag a fuming Relena from the corridor. He figured it would be better for everyone if he took her outside and waited by the emergency doors for the cab. She continued to rant about Duo and his corrupting of Heero with his gay tendencies. Nothing Treize could say would calm her down or distract her. He wondered what she would say if she knew he was bisexual? And going on a date with a guy next Wednesday.

With the departure of Relena, Duo all but collapsed against the wall. Zechs managed to support him though and when Sister Clarke returned from making the call to the cab company, Zechs assisted Duo to walk to one of the smaller treatment rooms.

Sister Clarke insisted that Duo's cheek be treated and his shin looked at before she would take him up to the OR waiting room.

"Just sit there, young man," she commanded and Duo obeyed, her tone insisted he did and after the
argument with Relena he wasn't feeling up to another one any time soon.

The sister flitted about the room, gathering together the things she wanted before dumping them into a kidney dish and returning to her patient. "Now, let's have a look at you and while I do, you can tell what that skirmish in the corridor was all about."

Duo winced as the sister wiped away the blood with antiseptic and water, cleaning the wounds neatly before applying an antibiotic cream. As she patched him up she gave her a brief outline of what had transpired between himself and Relena, careful to leave out all the colorful details.

The sister frowned and then had Duo roll up his trouser leg so she could inspect the damage done by Relena's crutch. Duo bit his lip as she poked the darkening bruise. "I don't think there's any damage other than bruising," she said. "Just be careful though and if it gives you any trouble we can take an x-ray of it."

"Thanks, Sister."

"My pleasure. Now, I'll take you up to the OR waiting room. Did you want your friend to come with you?"

"Oh, sorry, sister. This is Doctor Merquise, he's another vet."

"Pleased to meet you, doctor," the sister said.

"The pleasure is all mine," smiled Zechs. "I'm sorry we couldn't get here a little sooner and stopped that argument for you."

"That's okay. Thank you for your help though. From what I saw and what Duo has told me, I think that woman needs to see someone. That sort of obsession isn't normal," said the sister.

"I'm afraid Relena has been spoiled, everything she's ever wanted she's been given, so naturally she thinks she can have whatever she desires. Unfortunately, she thinks that stretches to her choice of partner as well."

"Yeah, well, she picked the wrong guy this time, Heero's mine and I'm not giving him up," snapped Duo. He wondered just how Zechs knew so much about Relena. He filed it away in his mind, he'd question the blonde vet about that later, once he knew Heero was okay.

"Well, I hope that other gentleman can calm her down and that she doesn't show up here again. I'd hate to have security forcibly remove her."

"You have a psyche ward, don't you, sister?" Duo asked innocently.

"Yes, we do. Why?"

"If she does show up again, just have her admitted, save everyone a lot of trouble." Duo couldn't help the smirk.

"You're evil, you know that?" replied the sister, but there was a smile on her face. "Don't tempt me though."

Zechs laughed. "If she keeps going at this rate you won't have to bother, she'll be committed anyway."

Sister Clarke held her grin and just shook her head. "I can't believe she wants to press charges
against you for assault, she's the one that took the first swing."

"I'd like to see her try," growled Duo. "I'd fight her every inch of the way."

"Don't worry. I saw what happened and I meant what I said. I'd stand witness for you that she took
the first swing and you were only defending yourself."

"Thanks, that means a lot to me."

"Come on, I'll take you both up the surgical floor and waiting room."

Duo and Zechs stood, following the sister out and to the elevator that would take them to the OR
waiting room.

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Chapter 27

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Treize managed to get Relena outside the emergency entrance to the hospital and sat her down on a bench to await the cab. He ran a hand through his hair, unsure of how to deal with the woman and her obsession. Treize had known of Relena's interest in Heero, but he didn't realize just how deep that interest had gone; until now.

The cab pulled up, diverting Treize's attention for the moment as he assisted Relena to get in. She hadn't said anything since he'd all but dragged her from the hospital and that worried him. He gave the cab driver the address and sat back in the seat, trying to figure out what to say to the woman beside him, as well as figure out what was going on inside her head.

Relena was busy thinking. She was still fuming from her run in with that excuse for a vet and didn't take kindly to being asked to leave the hospital. Knowing that she wasn't allowed to see her Heero didn't sit well and she was certain it would only be a matter of time before she would clear this up with the hospital staff and be allowed to visit Heero. A call to the hospital's board director would soon see this little matter taken care of.

Satisfied with that decision, Relena turned her attention to the other problem. One Duo Maxwell. He would be a little harder to remove from the scene. She didn't believe for one minute that Heero could possibly be interested in that long haired freak. True, she'd seen them kissing, but in her eyes it had been that vet doing the kissing, Heero, in his injured state, couldn't fight him off. She had to stop him from corrupting her Heero any further. She knew Heero would thank her for saving him.

Once Heero was out of surgery and feeling better he would tell the staff to let her in to visit. It was simply the knock to the head that was responsible for his altered behavior. Yes, that had to be it. After all, whenever she'd visited the stables or attended a show, Heero had always been polite to her, chatted with her and even agreed to take her out to dinner. That vet though. He'd always been curt, rude and generally nasty to her.

She would get her revenge on that queer. No one spoke to her like that and got away with it. She was Relena Peacecraft, a woman with authority. People listened to her when she spoke and she was damned if she would sit back and let that no good faggot get away with abusing her. A small smile tugged at her lips as she tossed around ideas in her head.

Treize watched the woman carefully out the corner of his eye. He was worried. He knew she was up to something, but he couldn't figure out what. "Relena?"

She turned to look at him.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," came the quiet reply.

Treize frowned. He didn't like the way she was acting. Unable to get any further response from the woman, Treize sat back and watched the lights pass by, his mind drawn towards the blonde vet.

"This it?" asked the cab driver, jolting Treize from his musings.

Recognizing the Peacecraft Manor gates, Treize realized they were at Relena's place. "Yes. Would you mind going up the driveway, please?"
The cabbie put his foot back on the gas and drove up the driveway. He came to a stop outside the front steps to the manor.

"Thank you. Would you mind waiting? I'll just get the young lady to the house and then get you to run me home so I can pick up my car and go back to the hospital."

The cabbie shrugged. "No problem. You're paying the fare."

Treize got out and went to the other side of the cab, assisting Relena out of the vehicle. He helped her up the front steps. "Do you have your key, or is your housekeeper on duty?"

The answer came a second later when the door to the manor opened and a blonde woman stood on the threshold. "Mister Treize?"

"Ah, Dorothy. I've brought Miss Relena back. There was an accident over at the stables this afternoon. No, Relena is okay, it wasn't her. Mr. Yuy, one of my students had a fall and was taken to the hospital. Look, I really need to get back to the hospital. Could you take care of Relena, please? She's had a bit of a shock with all that's gone on and she's a little upset. I'll call you later and let you know all the details."

"No problem, Mister Treize. I'll get her bathed and fed and into some warm clothes."

"Oh, Dorothy?"

"Yes?"

"Do me a favor? Don't take much notice of anything she says will you? There's a lot more to this than what Relena will lead you to believe. Wait until you hear my side of the story before making any judgment," Treize added in a low tone.

Dorothy nodded. "Of course. You'd better go, taxi's waiting and it will be costing you a fortune. I'll take care of Miss Relena. Just make sure you call and tell me what's going on when you get the chance."

"Thanks, Dorothy."

Dorothy took Relena by the elbow and helped the woman inside. Her mind was racing in circles, trying to figure out what Treize had meant by his words. She knew he would call her and give her the full story as soon as he was able to. Until then she would have to rely on Miss Relena's version, and she'd worked for the Peacecraft woman long enough to know Relena could twist the truth to suit herself when she wanted.

"Come on inside, Miss Relena. I've got a nice hot bath waiting for you. I'll wrap that cast in some plastic and then you can have a nice long soak while I get you something hot for tea."

Relena nodded. "Thank you, Dorothy, that sounds lovely."

Dorothy frowned. Something was going on. Relena seemed distracted. She shoved it aside for the moment making a mental note to keep a close eye on her boss.

Treize got back into the cab and gave the driver the address and directions to get to his residence. It didn't take long for the cab to be pulling up outside the front doors. Treize got out and paid the driver, thanked him and then walked briskly to the back of the house and his car. Unlocking it, he got in, started it up and headed back to the hospital.
Sister Clarke took Duo and Zechs along a corridor on the surgical floor, turned left, then right and stopped at a room several doors down. "This is the waiting room," she explained as they stepped inside. "Once the surgeon has finished operating he will come in here to find you and update you on Mr. Yuy's condition, as well as how the procedure went. There's a bathroom just out the door and to your right, a soda machine and snack vending machine are also down by the toilet. There's tea and coffee making facilities just over in the corner there; no charge. Magazines are in the holder there and there's a nurse call button on the wall there if you need assistance."

"Thank you, sister," said Duo as he looked around the spacious waiting room.

"I have to get back to the emergency department. My shift finishes in another three hours, I'll stop by before I leave to see what the news is on Mr. Yuy before I go home."

Duo moved across to the sister. "I can't thank you enough for all your help, sister. Not just with Heero, but for being understanding and not judgmental of us. Also I would like to apologize again for that little altercation in the corridor. It should never have happened." Duo gave the sister a warm hug and then stepped back, a pink tinge on his cheeks.

"You're most welcome, Duo. I'm here to help people get well, regardless of their race, creed, color or religion. I don't give a fig who or what you are, in my eyes we're all human, all equal."

"You're one in a million, you know that?"

"Oh, bosh!"

"Sister, if you ever decide to give up nursing humans, give me a call, I could always use you as a nurse in my vet practice."

It was the sister's turn to feel the blush rising to her cheeks. "Somehow I can't see myself nursing Dobermans, although some of the patients we have through here at times make me wonder if they are in the right place. Thank you though and I'll be sure to remember the offer. Now, I have to go. Oh, one more thing. I meant what I said earlier, about should the worst come to the worst and that woman decides to try and press assault charges on you. I'll stand witness for you."

Duo beamed. "If I didn't already have a partner, sister, I'd be asking you for a date!"

"And a fine sight that would make! A young, handsome thing like you with a portly old biddy like me?! Be off with you! I'll see you before I leave. Behave." The sister turned and left the waiting room, returning to the hustle and bustle of the emergency department.

Duo held the smile until she'd left and then he walked back across the room and sat heavily in one of the chairs. His smile slipped and his shoulders sagged. He dropped his head to his hands and closed his eyes. A warm hand on his shoulder caused him to look up.

"It's okay to let go." The words were soft, the hand comforting.

"Zechs..." Duo's voice faltered for a moment. "What am I gonna do? I'm so scared."

Crouching beside the chair, Zechs brought his arms around the younger vet and held him close, offering comfort and support. "Heero's going to be all right. He's a tough cookie, he won't let this set him back."

"Everything was going so right, Zero is jumping well, he'd just been advised he'd made it to the short
list, Taurus was coming along great - and now this! It isn't fair!"

"I know," soothed Zechs. "I wish there was something more I could do."

"It's okay. The company is more help than you know."

"Would you like a coffee?"

Duo eyed the coffee machine in the corner of the waiting room with suspicion. "You sure it's coffee in there?"

Zechs looked at the machine, a puzzled expression on his face. "Why? It says coffee on it and the sister also said it was. Is there something you're not telling me?"

Duo gave a low chuckle. "If it's anything like the coffee in the hospital canteen then I'm sure you could package it and sell it to the road workers for resurfacing the roads."

Zechs quirked an eyebrow. "Strong?"

"Stand your spoon up in it."

"Ah. Maybe a soda then?"

"Might be safer."

"Right." Zechs disappeared out into the hallway, returning a couple of minutes later with two sodas. He passed one to Duo and sat down with his own. They sat in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts, sipping on their sodas. Duo got up and went to the bathroom, when he returned he spotted Treize walking down the corridor with a young nurse. The nurse left Treize with Duo and returned to her duties.

"Any word?" asked Treize as he paused outside the waiting room door.

"Not yet," replied Duo and opened the door.

Zechs looked up as the ginger haired man entered, a soft smile played over his lips as his eyes fell on the man who had captivated him.

Duo sat down again, Treize sat next to Zechs on the couch.

"I left Relena with her housekeeper. Dorothy will calm her down and sort her out. Duo, I'm sorry about Relena."

Duo turned his weary eyes towards Treize. He could see the lines of fatigue etched into those handsome features. Treize had also suffered through a lot today and Duo felt sorry for the man. "It's okay, Treize. It's not your fault."

"I feel responsible though. If I had realized just how deep her infatuation with Heero was, maybe I could have averted this. I could have kept her away from the stables, made sure Heero wasn't around when she called by..."

"Treize!" Duo snapped. "Listen to me. This isn't your fault. You weren't to know how obsessed she was, you weren't to know she would spook the horse, so please, stop beating yourself up over it. I didn't know she was that obsessed either and I'm sure Heero didn't. Unfortunately, she doesn't seem the type to be reasoned with if that little temper tantrum earlier is any indication."
Treize sighed. Duo was right, he knew that, but it didn't make him feel any better.

"I don't think she's insane," began Zechs slowly.

"Could have fooled me," muttered Duo.

Zechs gave a snort. "No, not insane, just deluded, I think. She's so intent on having Heero for herself that she can't see anything else. Just how did she find out that you and Heero are a couple?"

"She must have seen us in the trauma room, kissing. At least that's what I can gather from what I remember of the argument. She said something about me kissing him and Heero being unable to fight me off." Duo gave a wry chuckle. "If I remember the kiss correctly, Heero wasn't protesting much, if anything he was after more."

"I'll try talking to her," said Treize.

"Good luck! I don't think you'll have much success in getting through to her," Duo said in a sarcastic tone. "She's only concerned about herself and what she can get."

"Give her time to cool down a bit, maybe then she will see things clearer. I'm sure if I try to talk to her tomorrow, explain to her about yours and Heero's relationship then she will back off and leave you two alone. That's if you don't mind me discussing your, errr... relationship."

"Treize, it really doesn't matter now. The cat's out of the bag, she knows I'm gay, I told her Heero was gay and she didn't believe that. What's it going to take for her to accept that Heero is mine, that he loves me, that he's not interested in girls, and certainly not her? Is she going to have to walk in on us fucking to believe Heero's as gay as they come?"

Zechs choked on his soda, spraying it across the carpet, Treize thumped him on the back.

"Shit! Can you at least wait until I don't have anything in my mouth before coming out with a comment like that?!" Zechs said as he mopped himself up.

"Sorry," said Duo with a sheepish smile. "I didn't mean to be so crude, but you know what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I get what you mean," replied Treize. "I don't think it will need to come to that though. I'm sure I will be able to talk some sense into her, and even if I can't, I'm pretty sure that Dorothy, her housekeeper, will be able to put her straight."

Duo stifled the snicker. Zechs looked amused, Treize raised an eyebrow in question.

"What?" Treize said, clearly missing the joke.

"Put her straight? I thought she was straight." Duo sniggered.

Treize rolled his eyes. "I'm getting a coffee." He stood up and went to the coffee machine in the corner of the waiting room.

"Might want to check your health insurance is paid up before drinking that stuff," Duo commented.

Treize filled his cup, added a dash of milk and teaspoon of sugar before turning back to the other two. "It's not that bad, is it?"

"Nice knowing you," said Duo.
Treize sniffed at the cup suspiciously. The thick, brownish liquid stared back at him. "It smells okay." He raised the cup to his lips and took a tentative sip. "Yuk! What the hell is this?"

"I did try to warn you," Duo smirked.

"Tastes like engine oil."

"I didn't know you were in the habit of drinking engine oil," Zechs said, amused at the contortions Treize's face was making.

"I'm not, but after that... God, that's awful." Treize looked around for somewhere to dump the contents of the cup. He spied a rather sickly looking plant to the side and went to tip the contents on the soil.

"Looks like a few people have done the same thing," mused Duo. "I wonder if they have plant doctors, 'cause I think that one is in desperate need of resuscitation."

"I would assume they do. I think I've heard the words 'tree surgeon' bandied about somewhere," said Treize as he pinched Duo's soda and took a long drink.

"Thanks, that's better." Treize handed the can back to a stunned looking Duo.

Duo wiggled the can from side to side, peered into the little hole and then tossed the can into the recycling bin. He was about to make a comment when a tall man in blue scrubs entered the room.

"Duo Maxwell?"

Duo stood up. "That's me."

"I'm Doctor Phelps. I've just finished surgery on Mr. Yuy."

* * *

The nurse brought the swab up and mopped the surgeon's brow, then she took the used needle and handed him another one threaded with the fine silk. Doctor Phelps continued to stitch.

"Blood pressure normal, heart rate normal, breathing normal," said Doctor Wolfe from his position by Heero's head where he was monitoring the various machines and amount of anesthetic traveling into his patient.

"Thanks. Nearly finished," replied Doctor Phelps from behind his mask. It had taken a while but the splintered bone had been pinned and plated back into place and should heal well. The collar bone had also been put back in and the patient would feel a lot more comfortable once he woke up.

The tinkle of the needle into the kidney dish signified the end of that part of the process. Doctor Phelps cleaned over the area, admiring the neat row of stitches before leaving the nurses to finish off. Gauze would be applied, then a bandage followed by the plaster cast to ensure the bone did not move whilst healing.

"I'll go speak with the family. Take him through to the recovery ward once the plaster is done and page me."

"Yes, doctor," replied the surgical nurse.
Doctor Phelps left, peeling off his gloves and mask as he entered the scrub up area. He tossed them into the bin and then removed his gown and hat. Giving his face a quick rinse under the tap and checking he didn't have blood on his scrubs, he headed out to the waiting room where the guy's anxious family would be waiting.

As he approached the waiting room, Doctor Phelps faltered for a moment. Instead of the usual parents, wife or girlfriend in the room, there were three men. Phelps frowned, shrugged his shoulders and then reached for the door handle. For all he knew the guy might not have any living parents and these might be his brothers or other relations. He looked quickly at the chart and noted the next of kin was listed as a Duo Maxwell. Obviously one of these men in here had to be that person.

"Duo Maxwell?" he asked as the three men turned to look at him.

"That's me."

Doctor Phelps looked at the slender man before him and gauged him to be around the same age as his patient. Not his brother though, he thought, noting the lack of Asian features. "I'm Doctor Phelps, I've just finished surgery on Mr. Yuy."

"How is he, doc? Did it all go okay? Will he be all right?" The words tumbled out of Duo's mouth.

The surgeon smiled. "He's going to be just fine."

Duo gave an audible sigh of relief and felt a load shift from his shoulders. "Thank god for small mercies."

"I have put the collar bone back in and it shouldn't cause any further trouble. I've also located the splintered sections of the bone, removed any that could pose a problem and pinned and plated the bone back into place. He's going to be in plaster for about six to eight weeks. The stitches will dissolve in ten days, but I'd like to do a scan on his arm in two or three days to make sure that the wound is healing okay and that there's no sign of any infection. I can also check that the stitches are dissolving properly."

"What if an infection sets in?" asked Duo.

"Then we will need to remove the plaster cast and treat the infection. It's extremely rare for an infection to get in and I don't anticipate any problems in this case."

"And the pins and plate?"

"They will need to remain in the arm for some time. They will be monitored as the bone heals and it's common to remove them after around twelve months or so, depending on the bone, how well it's healed and how strong it is."

Duo nodded. He'd thought as much. Surgery and the resulting aftercare were not all that different between humans and animals.

"He will be coming through to recovery soon. Once he's come around I can take you through to see him if you wish. Only one of you will be allowed though."

"Thank you, doctor. Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't introduce you," Duo said, his cheeks pinking a little with embarrassment. "This is Treize Khushrenada, Heero's boss."

Treize stepped forward and shook the surgeon's hand. "Pleased to meet you. Thank you for taking care of Heero for us."
"Nice to meet you too, and it's my pleasure."

"This is Doctor Zechs Merquise, a friend and colleague of mine."

"You're a doctor?" questioned Phelps as he took Zechs' hand and shook it.

"A doctor of animals, not humans, as is Duo here," replied Zechs with a smile.

"My apologies, I didn't realize I was talking to another couple of 'professionals'."

"You weren't to know, doc," smiled Duo. "Besides, our patients don't talk; they just bite, scratch or kick."

"I've had a few like that myself," chuckled the doctor. "Maybe our professions aren't as dissimilar as you might think." The surgeon's beeper went off and he quickly grabbed it from his pocket and looked at the tiny screen. "Mr. Yuy is back in recovery and awake. I'll take one of you through to him. Who is it going to be?"

"Ah, me, doc. I'm Heero's housemate." Duo shuffled his feet nervously.

The surgeon's mind suddenly clicked and he gave a smile. "Come on then, I'll take you through to your partner."

Duo left with Doctor Phelps, Treize and Zechs sat back down to await his return.

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"Mr. Yuy? Mr. Yuy? Can you hear me, Mr. Yuy? Come on, it's time to wake up."

Heero was floating in a pleasant dream. He was riding Zero around a huge course. The air was thick with tension; the only noise to be heard was the jingle of the bit, creak of leather, soft grunts and dull thuds as hooves hit into the arena surface. He'd cleared the water jump, flown over the gate and hopped neatly over the rustic rails. All that remained was the triple bar. He was clear so far, well within time, and if he cleared the triple he would have the gold medal in the bag.

He concentrated hard, riding Zero together, giving the horse the impulsion it would need. He ran a hand down the sweaty, satiny neck and felt the muscles quiver in reply. He put the legs on, Zero lengthening out his stride, hindquarters gathered underneath and prepared to launch into the air...

"Mr. Yuy?"

"Uh? Wha..." Heero was dragged from his dream by the calling of his name.

"Mr. Yuy? It's Nurse Stevens. Come on, time to wake up."

Heero forced his eyes to open, blinking groggily around him. The dream began to fade rapidly and he growled at the loss.

"Mr. Yuy? How do you feel?"

Good question.

As his senses began to come back online, Heero ran a mental check over his body. "I feel like I've been trampled by a herd of elephants," he replied.

The nurse chuckled. "That's to be expected. Are you in any pain?"
"No, not really. More a dull ache in my arm and shoulder at the moment."

"On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the pain? One being the lowest, ten the highest."

"I'd say about a four."

"Good. If it gets any worse, let me know and I'll give you something for the pain. I've paged Doctor Phelps and he will be here in a moment to explain what he's done to you. Once your temperature and other vitals are stable, we will take you down to the ward and make you comfortable."

"Thanks," Heero got out around a thick tongue. "Could I have a glass of water, please?"

The nurse moved to the side and returned a few moments later with a small paper cup and straw. She held the cup steady and pushed the straw between Heero's lips. "Just small sips for the moment."

Heero did as he was told, the cool liquid easing his parched throat. The nurse removed the cup and straw, settling it somewhere to the side before returning and tucking the blanket a little more firmly around her patient.

Doctor Phelps entered the recovery room and went to check his patient. He left Duo to wait outside the door for a moment, making sure everything was normal before he beckoned the young man in. "I've explained everything to your partner here, but I doubt he will remember much of it tomorrow. I will explain it all again tomorrow when he's back to normal, meanwhile, if he does ask you're free to repeat anything I explained to you earlier."

"Thank you, doctor."

"He should be alright to go to the ward in about half an hour. The nurse here will let you know when he's to be transferred and then your friends will be able to come to the ward and visit as well, but not for too long, Mr. Yuy needs to rest."

"I'll remember that," replied Duo softly. His feet were itching to take him across to Heero's side, his fingers ached to touch and reassure himself that Heero was okay.

"I'll leave you all to it then." Doctor Phelps turned to the nurse. "Page me if you need me."

"I'll take my leave."

"Thank you again, doctor." Duo held his hand out to shake the surgeon's.

Phelps smiled and shook the offered hand. "My pleasure, Doctor Maxwell. This is why we went into the field of medicine, to try and help, make a difference. Even if yours are not on the same intelligence scale as mine."

Duo laughed. "I don't know, doc. After some of the humans I've dealt with I'm beginning to wonder if dogs and cats aren't the superior species, they're certainly better behaved than some people I know." Duo's dark thoughts returned to Relena and the scene that had played out earlier.

"You could be right," replied the doctor. "Now, I really must go."

Duo watched as the surgeon left, then approached the side of the bed Heero was lying on. Sleepy cobalt eyes opened and a smile graced Heero's lips as his lover came into view.

"How are you feeling, Heero?" Duo asked softly. The nurse was still hovering around and Duo
resisted the urge to kiss his boyfriend.

"I'd feel a whole lot better if people would stop asking me that," murmured Heero.

Duo chuckled and then thought 'what the hell' and entwined his fingers with Heero's. "You had me worried for a while there, baby. Doc says you're going to be just fine though."

"I'm sorry I worried you."

"Shhh... It's okay, Heero. You're all fixed up now. You just need to rest and heal."

"What time is it?"

Duo glanced at his watch. "Seven thirty in the evening."

"The horses. They need to be fed, and you have consults," Heero began, the worry evident in his voice.

"All taken care of, Heero. Don't fret, I wouldn't let the horses starve."

Heero managed to cock an eyebrow.

"Actually, you can thank Catherine. When the call came through from Treize I kinda went into a bit of a panic. Catherine calmed me down and put me straight. She's organized for Hilde to cover my consults and she's looking after the kennels and the reception for me. She called Trowa and Quatre to come and lend a hand with the horses. They've all been fed and rugged up so don't worry about them."

Heero visibly relaxed. "I will need for you to tell me what you want them feeding though. I'm not sure what amounts of what feed stuff you give them and I don't want to upset their diets."

Heero smiled. "When they take me through to the ward, grab a pen and paper and I'll tell you."

Duo looked relieved. While he hadn't said anything and knew he was capable of putting the horses out and doing their stables and other work that went with them, he wasn't sure exactly how much of the concentrates Heero fed each horse. Horses had a temperamental dietary system and to mess around with it could cause problems.

"I'll just check your vitals again, Mr. Yuy, and if they are still stable we can move you to the ward," said the nurse stepping up to the side of the bed. If she noticed their entwined hands, she didn't say anything.

Duo waited patiently while the woman did her job, pleased when she said Heero could be moved. The nurse went in search of an orderly and Duo took advantage of the solitude to do what he'd been aching to do since coming into the recovery area. He leaned over the side of the bed and kissed Heero.

The kiss was sweet, tender and deep, letting Heero know how much Duo loved him. Heero put as much emotion back into the kiss as he could, trying to let Duo know he cared just as much for his lover and partner.

They broke apart, Duo smiling softly as he traced his fingers over Heero's lips. "I love you, Heero."

"Love you too, Duo. I really am sorry about all this."

"Not your fault, Heero. Now, stop blaming yourself and concentrate on getting better. You have a team to try out for, remember?"
Heero frowned. "I don't know if that will be possible now."

"I can't see why not. Doc said you will be in plaster for about six to eight weeks and we haven't heard from the selection board yet as to when the camp will be held. Somehow I don't think they will be sending out letters giving you only a week’s notice. After all, people do have their jobs and stuff to organize before they can get away."

"It's not just that, Duo. I'm sure they will give us a few weeks notice."

"Then what is it?"

"Zero."

"Zero?"

"He's got to be kept fit and his jumping up to par. How can I possibly hope to keep him in top condition if I can't work him?"

"Shit!" Duo hadn't thought about that. Zero would need to be worked, worked hard and regularly. Heero was right, he couldn't possibly hope to keep the horse in top condition if he couldn't ride.

"I'm sure we will figure something out, Heero. I'm not going to see you get this far only to have all your hopes and dreams dashed by one stupid act."

"I can't see how," replied Heero with a sigh.

Duo couldn't either, but he knew there had to be a way and he was determined to find it.

~ * ~

tbc....
Chapter 28

Dorothy took charge of her mistress as soon as Treize left, guiding the young woman towards the bedroom. "You sit here for a moment, Miss Relena, while I go and draw you a bath and fetch something to cover that cast with."

"Okay." Relena sat down on the chair by her vanity and gazed into the mirror.

Dorothy made sure she was okay before leaving to enter the en-suite bathroom and turn on the faucets. She sprinkled some scented bath crystals into the tub, checked the temperature and left to fetch some plastic to wrap around her boss' plaster cast. She returned a few minutes later to find Relena still sitting and gazing into the vanity mirror. She had a far away look on her face. Dorothy shook her head and went through to the bathroom again to turn off the water. Returning, she assisted Relena to the bathroom and wrapped the cast in plastic. "I'll go and check on your dinner while you take your bath, Miss Relena."

"Thank you, Dorothy."

Dorothy left, her mind mulling over what had possibly occurred that afternoon.

Relena enjoyed a good soak in the bath, her mind still scheming as she lay in the warm water, her foot hanging over the edge of the tub. After she'd had her dinner she would ring the hospital and see how Heero was doing. Tomorrow morning she would contact the hospital administrator and sort this problem out, then she would pay a visit to Heero. She smiled to herself as she thought about the handsome rider, then her smile turned to a frown when the face of that vet sprang into her mind. She growled to herself. She would have to do something about him.

A plan began to formulate itself in her head and the more she thought about it, the more she liked it. She would get back at him for corrupting her Heero. Taking him to court on an assault charge wouldn't stick, she knew that much. That nosy sister had informed her she would stand witness on that faggot's behalf and Relena believed her. No, there had to be another way and she was sure she'd found it.

By the time she'd finished with Doctor Duo Maxwell he would be lucky to get a job performing autopsies. Satisfied she'd found the answer to her problem, Relena got out of the tub and began to dry herself off. She was hungry.

Dorothy returned to her mistress' bedroom to find Relena out of the bath, dried off and dressed in her night apparel. She was sitting at the vanity brushing her long, golden locks. Dorothy moved up behind her and took the brush from her hands and began to work it through the silky mass.

"Mr. Khushrenada said there was an accident at the stables today, one of his riders got hurt. What happened?" Dorothy knew the best approach was the direct one; she also remembered what Treize had said about not believing everything that Relena might say.

"Yes, there was and it was awful. Heero was jumping one of the horses when it bolted. It tried to jump the paddock gate and fell. Heero was taken to the hospital, unconscious. I went with him."

Dorothy listened as Relena told her about the events of the afternoon. She knew about her mistress' fascination with the young rider, how could she not when Relena did nothing but talk about him. Dorothy sympathized with the young man though, she knew how obsessed and blinded Relena
could be when she set her sights on something. She was the same when working out new breeding lines with the horses at the stud.

Relena's voice changed when she began the tale of what happened at the hospital and her discovery of that vet kissing her Heero. Dorothy made the right noises in the appropriate places, all the time her mind trying to filter out the fantasy from the reality. As Relena described the argument that had ensued, Dorothy understood exactly why Treize had asked her to wait until she'd heard his version of events before drawing her conclusions. There was a whole lot more to this bun fight than Relena was letting on.

"I'll soon sort this out though and that Maxwell creature will rue the day he ever tangled with me, or put his fairy hands on my Heero," Relena finished.

The words were spoken in such a cold tone that Dorothy shivered. This wasn't sounding good at all. She knew Relena, knew that the woman was more than capable of inflicting revenge on those that dared to cross her. She also had friends in high places. Dorothy hoped Treize wouldn't leave it too long before enlightening her with the real version of events. While Dorothy had never met the vet called Duo Maxwell, she had heard a little about him and understood that he was a charming person, dedicated to helping animals with a real passion. Those that had dealt with him spoke of him with high regard and nothing had ever been said about the vet's sexuality. She wondered what Relena was planning and tried to do a little fishing. "What are you planning on doing?"

Relena's eyes sparked. "Oh, I've got a few ideas."

"Going to tell me?"

"Not yet. I need to figure a couple of things out first."

"Oh."

Relena laughed. "Don't worry, Dorothy, once I've worked out what I'm going to do I'll let you know. That Maxwell freak is going to wonder what hit him."

Dorothy didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Is dinner ready? I'm starved."

"Yes, it is. I've only got to dish it up."

"Good. Let's go eat then."

***

The nurse returned with an orderly after a few minutes and began to prepare Heero for the transfer to the ward. She hooked the IV to the side of the bed and made sure to put Heero's chart into the holder on the end of the bed. Duo moved to the side to let the nurse do her job, his eyes never leaving Heero.

"All set," said the nurse.

"Where is it he's going?" Duo asked.

"Ward 21, floor six," replied the nurse.

"Ah. Would it be okay for our other two friends to come up to the ward as well?"
"Doctor Phelps said it was okay as long as you don't stay for too long," replied Nurse Stevens.

"Thanks. I'll go get them, they're in the waiting room."

"Fine. Greg and I will take Mr. Yuy up now. Once you have your friends take the elevator to floor six, when you get out turn right and ask at the nurses' station for ward 21. They will point you in the right direction. We will be in room one."

"Thank you, nurse." Duo turned to Heero and smiled. "I'll grab Treize and Zechs and be right up."

"They're here?" Heero didn't know the blonde vet and his boss had arrived at the hospital.

"Yeah, they got here a while ago and have been keeping me sane."

Heero snickered.

"We need to move Mr. Yuy now," interrupted the nurse.

"Sorry." Duo stepped out of the way and let the orderly and nurse wheel Heero out of the recovery room and towards the elevator before turning on his heel and going to fetch Treize and Zechs.

Treize couldn't help but notice the smile on Duo's face as he returned to the waiting room. "How is he?"

"He's doing good," replied Duo. "They're transferring him to the ward now. The doc said it would be okay for us all to go visit him as long as we don't stay too long."

"That's good news," replied Treize, the relief evident in his voice as he stood up. Zechs also stood and followed the tall rider from the waiting room.

* * *

The nurse directed them to Heero's room and the three paused at the door, Treize and Zechs stepping to the side to allow Duo to enter first. Nurse Stevens had finished setting up the IV and was informing the ward nurse of Heero's injuries and surgery. Once she was done, she bid them all good evening and returned to the surgical floor. The nurse that would be tending to Heero through the night introduced herself as Nurse Pollard and checked that Heero was comfortable before exiting and leaving Heero alone with his lover and two friends.

Duo immediately sat on the edge of the bed and took Heero's hand in his own, careful of the drip. Treize and Zechs pulled up chairs and sat beside the injured rider.

"How are you feeling, Heero?" Treize asked politely.

Heero rolled his eyes. "I swear, if anyone else asks me that I'll hit them with my cast!"

Duo chuckled, Zechs grinned and Treize looked a little stunned.

"Don't worry, he doesn't mean it," snickered Duo.

They sat and discussed Heero's injuries for a short while, Duo repeating what the doctor had said about Heero's arm and how long it would be in plaster for. The conversation then led them to Heero's earlier dilemma; what to do about Zero and keeping him fit.

"I have no idea when the camp is going to be held," stated Treize. "But you're right, Zero does need to be kept fit."
"I can only do so much with him on the ground lunging wise to keep him fit. He really needs to be ridden and jumped a couple of times a week. I don't know how long it will be before the doc will let me ride again. I can work him under saddle even with my arm in plaster..."

"Oh no you don't," Duo interrupted. "I know you're a capable rider, Heero, but what happens if Zero gets a fright and you fall off? You'll be back to square one again, only worse."

"I doubt that Zero would turf me off," said Heero with a huff.

"Maybe not intentionally, but there's always that risk." Duo ran his thumb over the back of Heero's hand.

"I can't see that I have much choice. Zero has to be worked and kept fit..."

"I'll ride him," Duo blurted out and then looked at the three faces staring at him. "What? I've ridden him before."

"Duo, that's a nice offer, but Zero needs to be worked properly, not just hacking around the bush tracks. Jumping uses a lot of muscle and Zero needs to keep those muscles toned," said Treize gently. He didn't want to offend the vet, but he needed to point out the importance of the correct work regime for a showjumper.

Heero looked thoughtful for a moment and then spoke. "Actually, that's not a bad idea."

"Huh?" Treize looked at the injured rider. "What are you scheming now?"

"Duo has ridden Zero before so he knows the horse and the horse knows him. I think if Duo was to ride him each day in the paddock and I supervised, between the two of us we should be able to keep Zero fit enough. Although there is one other thing."

"And that would be?" Treize asked raising an eyebrow.

"Zero is going to need to be jumped a couple of times a week to keep him in form."

Duo paled a little at that. He knew he could ride well enough to control Zero on the flat and with Heero there as well it would be easier, but jumping? Duo hadn't learnt how to jump properly and to be honest, he wasn't interested. He enjoyed riding through the bush and at home in the paddock on Scythe; but jumping?

"While Duo is capable of working Zero on the flat, he isn't capable of jumping him," Heero said. "Treize? If I could ask a favor, do you think you would have the time to come over once or twice a week and put Zero over the jumps?"

Treize was stunned for a moment and stared at the other man. "You would trust me to jump Zero?"

Heero snorted. "Treize, you're a top rider, far better than me, why wouldn't I trust you?"

Treize smiled. "I'd love to jump him for you, Heero." Treize knew he wouldn't mind, he'd admired Heero's horse for some time and had often wondered what it would be like to ride and jump the gray; now he was getting that chance.

"Thank you, Treize, and you to, Duo." Heero smiled and then yawned. His head was beginning to ache and his shoulder to throb. Looked like the painkillers were starting to wear off.

Duo sensed his partner's discomfort and gave him a worried look. "Your arm hurting?"
"Yeah, a little."

"I'll call the nurse." Duo got up and went to locate the call button to push for the nurse.

"Thanks." Heero yawned again.

Seeing the yawn, Treize stood up. "I think we should be going and leave you to rest, Heero. We can discuss Zero a little more once you're out of here and arrange when it would be best for me to come over and jump him."

"Thanks, Treize." Heero's eyes focused on his boss and he lowered his voice a little. "Treize, I'm sorry about Taurus. Duo told me what happened. He was a good animal and didn't deserve this. I wish I could have stopped him..."

"Heero, that's enough," Treize growled softly. "This wasn't your fault so don't you dare think it was. If anything I should have had more sense than to allow Relena to come to the jumping paddock in the first place. No, this was just an accident, one of those things, you did everything possible to stop him, hell, I doubt even I would have been able to stop him. I'm just sorry that you also got hurt."

Heero could read the emotions in Treize's eyes and knew the man was barely holding onto his grief at the loss of such an animal. He could also hear the sincerity in Treize's voice. "I'm sorry," he repeated and then lowered his eyes.

Feeling the emotions rising in the room, Zechs stood and walked over to the bed, stopping just behind and to the side of Treize. "Get some rest, Heero. Good luck, I hope you're out of here soon and back in the saddle before long."

"Thank you, Zechs," replied Heero. "And thank you for taking care of Taurus and for coming in here."

"My pleasure. You concentrate on getting better. I'll keep in touch with Duo as to your progress."

Heero nodded.

With that the pair bade Duo goodnight and took their leave. Duo watched as they left, an amused smile playing on his face as he observed the blonde vet discreetly place his hand on Treize's lower back and guide him along the corridor towards the elevator. The nurse had come and was giving Heero another painkiller. Duo walked back into the room just as she was finishing up checking Heero's vitals. She gave the young man a smile as she put the blood pressure machine to the side and tucked Heero's blankets back around him.

"Anything I can get you, Mr. Yuy?"

"No, thank you."

The nurse turned to Duo. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave in a few minutes. Mr. Yuy needs to rest and visiting hours finished an hour ago."

"No problem, I will be on my way just as soon as I've said goodnight," Duo smiled at the nurse.

The nurse left, Duo stepped over to the bed again and ran his fingers lightly across Heero's forehead, brushing his bangs to the side and staring into the deep blue of his lover's eyes. "You sure you're okay, Heero?"

"I'll be fine, Duo. I'm sorry for all this trouble."
"Don't be. You didn't plan for this to happen." Duo leaned in and stole a kiss.

"Mmm... I like your kind of nursing, Doctor Maxwell," murmured Heero.

Duo chuckled. "I have a lovely bedside manner."

"You also have a lovely in bed manner too."

"Heero!"

Heero grinned. "Go home, Duo. There's nothing you can do for me here and you need rest as well. You have a practice to run and the horses to take care of."

Duo's eyes softened and he partook of another kiss, Heero returning the kiss and deepening it. "Love you, Heero."

"I love you too, Duo. Now, shoo. Go home and get some sleep." Heero's eyes were beginning to droop.

"I'll be back tomorrow."

"Look forward to it."

"Night, Heero." Duo gave his lover another kiss and then took his leave.

Heero was almost asleep, the painkillers the nurse had given him were doing their job and the throbbing had eased. Now all Heero felt was an overwhelming tiredness. His eyes slipped shut and his mind closed down as sleep took him.

Duo smiled as he watched his partner drift off. Once he knew Heero was asleep he left the hospital and headed back home. He had a practice to sort out, as well as horses and a routine to organize. He didn't know how long Heero would be in the hospital for, but he wanted to spend as much time with his boyfriend as he could.

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Zechs escorted Treize out of the hospital and to the car park. He walked Treize to his car and paused as the man unlocked the vehicle. Treize turned to the blonde vet and gave a deep sigh.

"It's been a long day, you need to go home and rest," said Zechs softly.

Treize ran his fingers through his hair and raised his eyes to meet those sapphire ones. "That it has. Thank you for all your help today, not just with Taurus, but for staying with me and bringing me to the hospital..."

"Shhh..." Zechs put his finger over Treize's lips to stop the flow of words. "There's no need to thank me. You've been through a very emotional time and I was glad I could be there to offer some support. Besides, I had my own, selfish reasons for staying."

"Oh?"

"It gave me the chance to spend some time with you, get to know you a little better," replied Zechs, his voice low and husky. He raised his hand to Treize's cheek and rested the palm against it. Treize leaned into the touch. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"That would be nice."
They stood in silence for a moment before Zechs took the initiative and closed the distance between them. Lips brushed fleetingly against lips sending tingles coursing along Treize's spine and then the touch was gone.

"Until tomorrow," Zechs said softly then removed his hand from Treize's cheek and turned on his heel to go to his own car.

Treize remained standing for a moment, watching the elegant figure walk away before getting in his car and starting it up. The brief touch of lips against his own had been unexpected, but welcome. With a slightly lighter heart, Treize set off for his home.

* * *

Duo arrived back at his home to find the horses all rugged up and fed, surgery locked up and Hilde and Catherine waiting for him in the kitchen. The smell of food assaulted his nostrils as he entered causing his stomach to growl. He hadn't realized how hungry he was. Catherine took charge of him, sending him to wash his hands while she dished up the food.

Sitting down to a bowl of hot beef stew, Duo answered the women's questions and gave them the full run down on Heero's condition. He told them what he knew of the fall and subsequent death of Taurus, of Treize and Zechs' support at the hospital and tried to hedge around the argument he'd had with Relena.

Hilde wasn't fooled for a moment and soon dragged the sorry tale from Duo. When he'd finished relating what had happened, Catherine insisted on looking at his shin and making sure for herself that he was okay. In one way it was nice to have someone fussing over him, especially after all the emotional upsets he'd gone through. He let the girls mother him as much as they liked.

Hilde wasn't happy with the way Duo had been treated by Relena and voiced her opinions - loudly. Duo was grateful Hilde hadn't been present as no doubt she would have ripped the woman limb from limb. Catherine also voiced her disapproval, only being a more gentle person she wasn't quite so vehement as Hilde.

Duo was too tired to argue with either of them, he wouldn't have won anyway so there wasn't any point. Instead he managed to change the topic, asking about the horses and consults. Catherine and Hilde filled him in on the clients from the evening and passed on the many kind wishes for a speedy recovery to Heero from many of the clients. Knowing that Heero was likely to be in the hospital for a few days and that Duo would want to spend as much time as he could with his partner, Catherine and Hilde had reworked the roster to give Duo that time.

Duo felt the emotion rising in his chest again and had to choke back the lump in his throat. He knew he had good friends, but just how loyal and good they were was now being revealed fully to him. He didn't know how he would have coped without them. They sat over coffee discussing a few things before the girls made their way out and to their respective homes. Hilde would be back in the morning to handle the consults for the day leaving Duo free to see to the horses and then go to the hospital. Trowa and Quatre would come by in the evening and bring the horses in again, allowing Duo to stay at the hospital until visiting time finished.

Duo did a quick check of the horses, feeding them each a goodnight carrot and then locked up the stable block. He made his way back to the house through the cool night air and checked everything was off and locked up. He took a quick shower and then tumbled into bed, exhausted. Sleep didn't come easily though. Having been with Heero for so long now, Duo missed his partner's body in the bed next to him, missed the warmth, missed the cuddling. His heart ached with longing and eventually he grabbed Heero's pillow, hugging it close and breathing in the scent of his lover.
Gradually fatigue crept over him and took him into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Treize picked at the meal Jenny had left for him, he really didn't have an appetite. Having forced down enough of the meal to appease his housekeeper, Treize went through to his study. He needed to call Relena and see how the woman was doing. He also needed to give Dorothy the proper version of events and see what Relena had come up with regarding her version. Picking up the handset, Treize dialed the number of the Peacecraft manor.

"Peacecraft manor, Dorothy speaking."

"Ah, Dorothy."

"Treize! About time you called. I've been waiting on a knife edge here for you to ring and tell me exactly what happened."

Treize gave a smile. He knew what Dorothy was like and so it didn't surprise him that she would be chomping at the bit to know exactly what had happened. Taking a deep breath, he told her all that had occurred that afternoon, from Taurus bolting to the argument between Duo and Relena.

Dorothy listened quietly, allowing Treize to speak at his own pace and enlighten her. She found several differences between Relena's story and the one Treize was telling her now. That didn't surprise her though, she knew Relena well enough not to believe everything her boss told her.

When Treize had finished talking, Dorothy found she had lot of information to wade through. She could sympathize with Treize over the loss of the horse and injury to one of his riders. She felt annoyed with Relena for having been so thoughtless and cause such a tragic accident. What really got to her though was the argument that had taken place. Treize hadn't been able to give her a lot of information on the argument as he'd only walked in on it towards the end. He did fill in gaps with what Duo Maxwell had told him and Dorothy was more inclined to believe Treize than Relena.

This obsession her boss had with the dark rider wasn't healthy, for any of them. It was obvious after Treize's words that the vet and the rider were in love, were a couple, and yet Relena couldn't see that; or rather, didn't want to see it. Dorothy sighed. She was starting to get a headache.

What concerned Dorothy the most now though was what her boss could possibly be planning.

"Treize, thanks for filling me in. Relena gave me her version earlier, but after hearing yours I'm inclined to believe you over her. This obsession she has isn't good."

"No, it isn't," replied Treize. "I was hoping to come over tomorrow and try to have a talk with her, try to get her to see that Heero isn't interested in her and maybe she will get it and leave the guy alone."

"You're welcome to try, although I don't think it will do a lot of good," began Dorothy. "I can also try and talk to her. I've never met either of these men, but from what you've told me they seem to be very happy with each other."

"They are."

"Look, Treize. I'll be honest with you, I don't support same sex couples, but I don't condemn them either. I think everyone has a right to live and love whom they please and I prefer to stay neutral on this issue, however," Dorothy paused for a moment. "However, I do not believe in someone being victimized simply because they choose to share their life with a partner of the same sex."
"I can understand and respect your views, Dorothy."

"Thank you. Now, I need to tell you something."

"Oh?"

"It's Relena. She's still convinced that this Heero fellow is the right guy for her and equally
determined that Duo is trying to corrupt him. She's up to something, planning some sort of revenge
and frankly, I'm worried. Relena has friends in high places and while she hasn't confided in me yet
what it is she proposes to do, I'd be warning that vet to be careful. I'd hate to see anything happen to
him simply because Relena can't accept that the man she wants is gay."

Treize remained silent for a moment, thinking over Dorothy's words. "Thanks for the warning,
Dorothy. I'll be sure to let Doctor Maxwell know to be aware."

"No problem, Treize. If I can find out any more I'll let you know."

"That would be great. Meanwhile, I'll let Duo know what's going on. Keep in touch, Dorothy."

"I will. You too, Treize, and good luck."

"Bye." Treize hung up the 'phone and reclined back in his chair. His eyes closed as he thought on
Dorothy's words. He had been right then in his assumption that Relena was plotting something in the
taxi on the way back from the hospital. If only he knew what it was he could possibly stop it before it
happened.

Treize got up and poured himself a scotch. The amber fluid burnt a trail down his gullet as he sipped
on it, the fire welcome. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't think what Relena would do. He
was pretty certain she wouldn't be pressing any charges for assault, she wasn't that stupid knowing
there were witnesses to testify otherwise. No, it had to be something a little more devious. But what?

Treize picked up the 'phone again and called Duo's number. A slightly sleepy voice answered him
and Treize looked guiltily at the clock. "Duo, it's Treize. I'm sorry to call you this late, I didn't realize
the time."

"S'okay. What's up?"

Treize proceeded to fill Duo in on his conversation with Dorothy. He didn't want to scare Duo, but
he wanted the vet to be aware that the woman was plotting against him.

Duo was grateful for the call and forewarning. "Thanks, Treize. No idea what it is she's planning?"

"No, I don't, but Dorothy did say she would let me know if she found out. All I can suggest is that
you be careful."

"I will. I don't know what she hopes to gain though. Heero's not interested in her at all."

"I know." Treize gave a sigh. "I'm going to try and talk some sense into her tomorrow."

"Okay. Good luck."

"Thanks. Good night and I'm sorry again for the late call."

"No problem, Treize, I appreciate the warning. Night."

* * *
Relena was up bright and early the next morning. She washed and dressed then headed for the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea. She drank the tea down, staring out the kitchen window at the wakening day, smiling at the birds as they flitted over the grass in search of insects. Once the tea was gone, Relena hobbled through to her office and picked up the 'phone. She dialed the number of the hospital and waited to be connected.

Five minutes later she replaced the receiver and growled softly. Her anger was starting to rise again. The hospital refused to connect her to Heero's room, instead they had put her through to the nurses' station. All they would tell her was that Heero was comfortable and nothing more. When she inquired as to their visiting hours, she was informed Mr. Yuy was restricted to certain visitors only and as her name didn't appear on the list she wouldn't be allowed to visit.

To say she wasn't happy would be an understatement. This was all that vet's fault, him and his homosexual ways. She looked at the clock, the hospital administrator should be in so she called him.

Ten minutes later, Relena wore a face like thunder. Nothing she had said had convinced the administrator that she should be allowed to visit Heero. He'd cited protocol, regulations and the following of patient's wishes in his defense of the hospital and staff. Relena had argued, threatened even, but the administrator stood firm. He didn't like arguing with the woman and had done his best to keep his temper in check as he'd explained the rules to her. Even when she threatened him with his job he wouldn't be swayed.

Relena had hung up on him.

Realizing she wasn't going to get her way and visit Heero any time soon, Relena's eyes narrowed and she thought about her revenge on the vet. A smile creased her lips and she reached for the 'phone directory. She skimmed through the pages, locating the name and number she needed before dialing. The call connected and the 'phone began to ring. Relena waited patiently for it to be picked up.

"Australian Veterinary Board. How can I help you?"

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 29

Chapter 29

Things were pretty hectic for Duo over the next few days, despite Catherine, Hilde, Trowa and Quatre all doing as much as they could to ease the burden. Catherine took over the complete running of the reception area of the practice, fielding calls regarding Heero's accident and passing on the good wishes. Hilde did double consults wherever possible while Trowa and Quatre came over every afternoon and brought the horses in, fed them and rugged them up for the night.

Heero's head was cat scanned again each day and the doctor was pleased that the small amount of bleeding had stopped, the bruising also had begun to recede and there was no sign of swelling. Heero was relieved about that, not just from the results but it also meant he didn't have to wear those horrible paper hospital gowns and underpants anymore. When he'd confided in Duo about having to wear them Duo had laughed himself silly just at the thought of Heero in paper underwear. Heero hadn't thought it funny at all; they chafed, and that sent Duo into another fit of laughter. The cast had been checked, the arm x-rayed again and the injury healing as well as the doctors could have hoped for. Heero was tired of the hospital and wanted to go home. Sister Clarke had visited him each time she'd been on duty in the emergency department, even if it was for only a few minutes. Duo came every day, arriving mid morning and staying until early evening when the nurses usually kicked him out.

After five days in the hospital the doctor was pleased enough with Heero's progress to send him home. Heero was ecstatic and had 'phoned Duo right away, the vet wasting no time in heading straight to the hospital to pick his lover up. They had bid the nursing staff farewell and thanked them for all their hard work looking after Heero. The nurses had been sad to see the pair go, they'd quite enjoyed having the dark rider and his cheerful boyfriend around. Doctor Phelps had met with them again and handed over the remainder of Heero's medication; painkillers should he need them and the rest of the course of antibiotics. An appointment had been made for three weeks time for Heero to come into the out patients section and have the cast and the wound inside checked. Meanwhile if they had any concerns they could either come back to the hospital or see Heero's GP.

Stopping off in the emergency department, they spent a few moments with Sister Clarke, thanking her for all her help when Heero had first been brought in. Duo also thanked her again for her help with Relena. Duo hadn't told Heero about his argument with the woman and had asked Treize, Zechs and Sister Clarke not to mention it either. Duo thought it best if Heero didn't know, it would only worry and upset Heero and he had enough to worry about as it was. Duo knew that Relena had tried to get information on Heero while he was in the hospital, even going so far as to contact the hospital administrator. It hadn't worked though, much to Duo's relief. Sister Clarke had told him about it when he was visiting one day, the administrator having contacted her in regards to the wishes of the patient and making sure he had all his facts before letting Relena know she wasn't permitted to visit.

Duo would have loved to have been a fly on the wall at the Peacecraft Manor when that news had come through.

Heero hadn't asked about the woman either.

Now Heero was back home again and on the road to recovery. The first thing he'd done when he arrived home was to head straight out to the paddock to see his beloved horse. Zero had come cantering over to the fence the moment he'd heard his master's voice and immediately began to snuffle over Heero's form, searching for carrots. He'd sniffed the cast on his master's arm and sensed
there was something wrong with his master. He didn't know what was ailing the human he trusted but he instinctively knew he had to be gentle. He'd been very polite in asking for carrots. Heero had rubbed the gray face, stroked the horse's ears and made a big fuss of the stallion.

After assuring himself that Zero was well, Heero stopped by Scythe and then Shinigami. Scythe was her usual calm self, gently nudging Heero and wuffling through her nostrils in delight at seeing him again. Shini was cautious, the unusual, clinical smell that came from the human upsetting him a little, not to mention the strange white thing on the human's arm.

Once Heero had satisfied himself that all was well with the equines, he allowed Duo to take him to the house where he was immediately fussed over by both Hilde and Catherine. Morning consults had finished and the pair had come down to the house to set up a surprise welcome home for Heero. Duo also got the shock of his life when he walked into his normally tidy kitchen to find it festooned with streamers, balloons and a large banner with 'Welcome home, Heero' written on it. As soon as Duo had left to fetch Heero, the girls had called Trowa and set to work. Quatre couldn't make it as his work schedule didn't permit him to.

They all sat around talking, catching up on things and filling Heero in on what had been going on while he'd been in hospital. Duo had also warned Hilde and Catherine not to say anything regarding his argument with Relena and they had agreed, albeit reluctantly on Hilde's part. Time passed quickly and soon Hilde and Catherine left to return to the surgery for evening consults, Trowa also left after Duo assured him he would be able to see to the horses from now on. Heero thanked the tall man for all his help while he'd been out of commission, Trowa just shrugged it off, reminding Heero that that's what friends did for each other.

Treize called as did Zechs and Heero spent some time on the 'phone to them both. Treize arranged the most suitable days and times to come over and jump Zero, Zechs had promised to stop by and catch up with Heero's progress as soon as he could get time off from work.

Even with his arm in a cast, Heero was still able to do some things around the stables. Duo had been cautious and reluctant to let Heero do anything at first, but when he'd seen the determination in his lover's eyes as well as the fear of helplessness, Duo had held his tongue and allowed Heero to do as he wished, keeping a close eye on the man though to make sure he didn't push himself too much.

Being unable to ride or do a great deal with the horses, Heero took to spending more time with Catherine in the reception area, bringing the books up to date and generally filing all the information from the surgery; client details, drug stocks, surgery bookings and all the other numerous things that had to be kept track of onto Nrobbuts' data base. He also burned all the information to disc so if the system crashed they had a back up.

Relena tried to call the surgery a few times, asking to speak with Heero. Catherine had politely refused to put the woman through to Heero, stating that she couldn't tie up the practice phone line for simple chit chat. She said she would be happy to pass on any messages though. When Relena had requested the number of the residence, Catherine refused point blank to give it. She told the woman it was a silent number for privacy reasons and she couldn't give it out to anyone under any circumstances. If she wished to gain that number Relena would have to speak with Doctor Maxwell himself as he decided who had his private number and who didn't.

Relena had hung up.

Duo hadn't been impressed to know that Relena had been calling the practice but thanked Catherine for her dealing with the woman. Once Heero found out he refused to answer the phone at all just in case it was Relena. He had no wish to speak to the woman and was still coming to terms with the fact that she was the cause of his injuries and the death of a good horse. Relena showing no
acceptance for her actions cut Heero deeper, not for himself but for Treize and Taurus. Heero simply couldn't understand how she could be so blind as to not see that she was the reason they were in this situation.

The daily routine took on a few minor adjustments but Duo and Heero adapted well. Hilde did all the morning consults, Duo took over the evening ones; any surgery they had booked, they shared. During the morning Duo would put the horses out and feed them, Heero joining him and helping out with the stable work. After breakfast they would potter around the house, catching up on the domestic chores before going out to the paddock where Duo would work Zero for an hour or so under Heero's watchful eye.

At first the stallion had been a little uncooperative, he'd enjoyed a week's holiday and he didn't want to come back into work. Zero knew his usual master wasn't riding him and so tried a few little tricks to get out of working. Duo was by no means as skilled at riding as Heero was, but he could walk, trot and canter okay. Zero knew the nice human wasn't as experienced and while he didn't do anything to harm Duo, he made the vet work really hard to get him to do anything at all.

"Use your legs, Duo. He's not listening to you at all," Heero called out.

"I am using them," Duo called back. He felt as if his legs were going to drop off he'd been pushing the gray so hard.

Heero sighed. "He's taking advantage of you, watch him, he's going to try and cut his circle. More inside leg, push him back out." Heero shook his head as Zero cut the circle. Heero knew that Duo could ride the gray but his inexperience was what the problem was. Duo was applying his leg, doing as Heero instructed but he was just that fraction too late with his aids and Zero knew it. That was the main difference between Heero and Duo in their riding. Duo was still learning, Heero could anticipate and put the aids into effect and prevent Zero from evading the work.

"Bring him down to walk and come in here," said Heero.

Duo sat down in his saddle and closed his fingers on the reins, Zero immediately dropping to the walk. He turned the stallion and rode to where Heero was standing. "I am trying, Heero," Duo said. "He's just that bit quicker than me though."

"I know, Duo. He knows you're not experienced and he's taking advantage of that. It's not easy but you have to try and anticipate what he's going to do and put the aids into effect before he can do it. At the moment he starts to evade and you're not quick enough to correct him. It isn't your fault, it's something that comes with time and practice. Just try to be aware of where he's likely to try and shirk off and beat him to it."

Duo collected up the reins again and put Zero back out onto the circle. Pushing the horse into a trot, Duo tried his best to get the animal collected up and using his hindquarters. It wasn't easy and Duo was beginning to get frustrated. He knew Zero was playing him up and he didn't like it. Duo was normally a very laid back rider, gentle with his aids and very rarely used a whip. In fact he never carried one when riding as a rule but Heero had made him carry one this time. Once more Zero tried to cut his circle and Duo was a fraction too late with his inside leg; when he did apply it, Zero ignored it.

"If he's not going to listen when you push with your leg, Duo, give him a kick."

Duo tried again, pushing his inside leg against Zero's side only to have the gray ignore him. He did
what Heero said and gave Zero a sharp kick. Feeling the kick against his side, Zero grunted and tossed his head.

"That's it!" muttered Duo. "Ignore me again, Zero, and I'll really give it to you." Heero was shouting to him to push Zero out, the horse still ignoring Duo's aids. Duo tried another, harder kick, Zero still ignored him and Duo snapped.

The whip came down smartly against Zero's side in exactly the same place Duo had been using his leg [1]. The response was electric. Zero immediately moved away from the whip and back out onto the circle, his hocks came underneath him and he lowered his head, beginning to work properly.

Heero watched in amusement. He'd wondered how long it would be before Duo gave the horse a smack with the whip and put an end to this nonsense.

Duo grinned to himself. He continued on the circle waiting for Zero to try cutting in again. The gray started to sidle towards the inside of the circle, Duo put the leg on then backed it with the whip again. This time Zero almost ran back out onto the circle. As they came around for the third time Zero didn't try anything. Seemed he'd learnt his lesson.

"Much better, Duo," encouraged Heero. "You need to let him know you're the boss and that he has to listen to you."

Duo smiled, his confidence increasing and he continued to work the stallion for another half hour before deeming the gray to have had enough.

Treize came over the following day to put Zero over the jumps for the first time. Duo fetched the horse in and saddled him up while Heero explained how the gray liked to be ridden. Each horse was different and had its own quirks. Zero liked to know his rider was there but responded best to a light contact with his mouth, soft leg aids and a firm seat. With Zero saddled and ready, Duo led him out and down to the jumping paddock for Treize to mount.

Treize took up the reins and mounted with ease, swinging his leg over and settling gently into the saddle. He adjusted his stirrups then took up contact with the horse's mouth and applied the legs. Zero walked off with an easy stride. Duo stood beside Heero and watched as the taller man rode around, getting the feel for the horse as Zero was similarly checking out the new rider's capabilities. Heero had warned Treize that Zero would probably try to pull the wool over his eyes and get away with not working properly so when Treize asked the horse to trot and collect up he wasn't surprised to feel the horse lurch into an unbalanced trot and ignore his aids.

Duo smiled in amusement as he watched. He felt a little better knowing it wasn't just him that Zero tried to play up with. To see Treize having similar problems cheered him up. "He's a crafty bugger," Duo said softly.

"Yeah, he'll try and get away with whatever he can to avoid working. He's too smart for his own good sometimes," replied Heero as he watched the gray 'testing' out the new rider.

Treize let the horse meander along for a few minutes and then asked him to bring his hindquarters underneath. Zero acted as if he didn't have a clue what his rider was asking for.

"Okay, boy. Have it your way," muttered Treize and then sat down deep in his saddle. Treize used his seat and legs to drive Zero together, Zero tried to evade by dropping his shoulder and veering to the left. Treize had anticipated this and had his legs ready, pushing the horse forward once more.
Zero grunted and tried to cut in; again Treize's leg was there to prevent him from doing so. When Treize pushed him on again, Zero tried giving short, choppy strides. Treize gave the gray a sharp smack with the whip and immediately followed through by driving Zero forwards with his seat.

Zero knew it was time to give up. This rider obviously knew what he was doing.

"Good boy. That's much better," praised Treize and patted the gray neck. Zero rounded up, softened his back and began to work properly.

After working the horse for half an hour on the flat Treize felt he was confident enough with the horse to jump him. He brought Zero to a walk and approached Heero and Duo who had been watching from underneath the tree. "You weren't kidding when you said he would try me out," said Treize.

"He's a crafty sod at times. He's just lazy and will try to get out of working properly if he can. Poor Duo had one hell of a time with him the other day, Zero refused to listen to Duo at all," Heero said with a chuckle.

"He listens now though," stated Duo. "After I gave him a crack with the whip."

"Sometimes you have to give them a sharp smack. It doesn't hurt them but helps to re-establish your position as boss," Treize said with a smile. He turned his attention back to Heero. "I'll pop him over some fences now if you like."

"That would be good." Heero went on to explain the course layout to Treize. Treize nodded and followed the course of jumps with an experienced eye.

"Fine. Let's see what happens." Treize collected his reins and rode Zero off in the direction of the jumps. He pushed the horse into a canter, sat down in his saddle and collected the gray together before turning him towards the first jump.

Zero eyed up the jump, a simple brush fence and pricked his ears. He felt his rider's weight shift slightly in the saddle, legs applied to his sides and Zero lengthened his stride a touch. The fence came closer, Treize kept a light contact with the gray's mouth and then rode the horse together for the last three strides. Zero lengthened out, brought his hocks underneath him and sprang into the air. He cleared the jump easily, landing safely and looking eagerly for the next fence.

Duo gave a low whistle as he watched the pair going around the course. He could easily see why Treize was a silver medalist, the man seemed to blend with his horse and had a natural sense of timing. Despite all that though, Duo still thought the stallion jumped better for Heero.

"He goes better with you though."

Heero looked surprised and faced his partner. "He does? How?"

Duo knew he was on shaky ground. He had to let Heero know he was sincere in his comment and not just saying it to make Heero feel better. He chose his words carefully. "He seems to be more relaxed when you're on him, sort of flows better around the course. I know he's traveling well for Treize, but with you it's kinda like the two of you are one, he knows what it is you want before you can ask and you know how much he's able to give and don't ask for more. It's a great combination"
The blush on Heero's cheeks told Duo he'd said the right thing.

"Thank you."

Duo smiled and took Heero's hand in his own. They watched as Treize continued around the course of jumps. Once the round was finished, Treize brought the gray back to where Heero and Duo were standing to get Heero's input on their performance and add his own thoughts. While the two riders discussed Zero's performance, Duo petted the horse and fed him a carrot. Heero thought Zero could do with another round, a little higher this time. Treize agreed as he felt the horse wasn't putting in as much as he could and the higher fences would see the horse having to concentrate more.

Duo gave Heero a hand to raise the jumps he wanted raising and increase the distance on a couple of the spreads. Once the course had been altered, Treize rode Zero around and then attempted to jump again. The three were so absorbed in watching or riding that they didn't hear the approaching footsteps until the person was beside them. Duo nearly jumped out of his skin when a low voice said, "Hello."

Duo and Heero both spun around at the sound of the voice and were met with amused, blue eyes.

"Shit, Zechs! Gimme a heart attack, why don't you?!" Duo said and shook his head.

"Sorry. I thought you would have heard me walking up." Zechs gave a smile. "How are you, Heero?"

"I'm doing a lot better, thanks for asking," Heero replied.

Zechs smiled at the pair and then his eyes shifted to rest upon the form of Treize astride the big gray. Duo noted with some amusement that Zechs' eyes softened a little when he looked at Treize. Idly he wondered what was going on between the pair and made a note to question Zechs about it as soon as he had the chance. Heero also noticed something between the pair, Treize relaxed a little more with Zechs around. Heero's mind did a Duo; wondering what was going on between the two. Treize had told Heero he was bisexual, Heero had kept that information to himself and really hadn't thought much about it; until now. His eyes narrowed a little as his brain kicked into gear. Was it possible that Treize and Zechs were seeing each other? Heero glanced at Duo and noted with satisfaction that his lover also appeared to be intrigued with the pair. Interesting.

Treize took the stallion over the jumps again, pleased with the gray as the animal listened to his aids and cleared all the fences with an effortless style. Treize had ridden a lot of horses over the years and some of those would stay in his memory as being exceptional animals. Zero was one such horse. Once the stallion had accepted Treize as a rider, Treize found him to be willing and eager, the lightest touch of rein or leg guiding the horse. He also had a tremendous jump on him and Treize knew Heero had a really good animal in his possession. Pulling up after the last fence, Treize patted the gray neck and praised the stallion verbally as well.

Zero knew he'd been good and tossed his head. He jogged a little as he headed back towards the other humans, and one human in particular; he wanted his reward of carrots.

A smile lit up Treize's face when he spotted Zechs standing with Heero and Duo, a warmth stole over him and he felt his pulse quicken a touch as memories of their date, the one they'd arranged when heading to the hospital to be with Duo and Heero after Heero's accident, returned.

~ Flashback ~
Zechs had arrived promptly at six thirty, dressed to kill in a light blue button down shirt, black slacks and black jacket. Treize had done his best not to drool at the sight. Treize had chosen to wear a charcoal shirt, matching slacks and black jacket. The appreciative look Zechs had given him hadn't gone unnoticed.

"I wasn't sure what to wear since you haven't told me where we're going," Treize said.

"You look great," replied Zechs. "Do you like Italian food?"

"Yes."

"Good. I've taken the liberty of booking us a table at a quaint little Italian restaurant I spotted the other day when driving to a case. It's in the next county. I thought we could catch a movie afterwards if you like."

"Sounds great. What would you like to see?" replied Treize as they walked out to Zechs' car.

"There's a new movie out that's supposed to be good called 'Brokeback Mountain'," said Zechs as he opened the car door for Treize [2].

"Is that the one with the cowboys that share more than herding sheep?" Treize answered with an amused smile on his lips.

Zechs grinned nervously. "Yeah, it is. A couple of my friends have seen it and they recommended it. The scenery is supposed to be breathtaking and the acting is great."

"Then I've no objections to seeing it," returned Treize as he buckled up his seat belt.

Zechs gave a laugh and did up his own seat belt before starting the car and driving off.

The restaurant was cozy with Italian music playing softly in the background. The waiter led them to a table at the rear and gave them menus. Treize decided to try the cannelloni while Zechs opted for the spaghetti bolognaise. Garlic bread appeared along with two glasses of red wine. The conversation flowed nicely as each man relaxed and became more comfortable with the other. Treize learned that Zechs had qualified as a veterinary surgeon but rather than go into a practice, he'd decided to sign up with a company that provided temporary staff to other companies when they needed relief workers. He'd been a locum for a few years, working in different areas for different practices as the need arose. He'd thoroughly enjoyed the work too and gained valuable experience in all areas of veterinary medicine.

Had he simply opted to go into a practice some of his skills would have been lost, not through any fault of his own or whatever practice he chose to work at. It was a fact of life. Some practices dealt only with small animals, others with the larger ones, but by being a locum he got to see all sorts of work. He'd done some locum work for the Oakford Equine Hospital and found he really enjoyed working with horses. When the practice had begun to expand, they offered him a permanent position. Zechs was thinking about settling down, giving away the locum work and getting a permanent job in a practice when the offer had come up. After a little thought and negotiation, he'd agreed and joined the practice.

He'd not regretted his decision.

Over coffee Treize gave out a little information on himself. He'd started riding as soon as he could walk and joined the local Pony Club when he was eight. From there he'd learned to ride and jump, his first pony had been a handful and Treize had found himself on the ground more times than on the pony's back, but he persevered. His skills improved and he soon graduated to a larger pony. By the
time he was twelve he was competing in the Pony Club state teams. He didn't care much for school and would have rather been riding, but he stuck it out and thanked his father's continuous badgering for having a decent education. He wasn't dumb by any means, in fact he was quite intelligent, he just saw school as a waste of riding time.

Luckily he'd stayed and managed to pass all his exams. Now he found that basic maths was very handy to riding and negotiating courses. As his experience grew, so did his horses. People began offering him horses to ride and jump, gradually he worked his way up through the ranks, saving his prize money until he could afford to buy top animals of his own. It was an interesting business. He charged others to ride their horses and jump them for them, kept a share of the winnings and then ploughed that money back into the stable.

Soon he had a thriving business that kept him fed and clothed, it was also something he loved doing.

He'd been short listed for the Olympic team and eventually went on to compete and win a silver medal for his country two years ago. The horse he'd competed on, Zodiac, belonged to a friend and immediately went to stud after the games. With his new found fame, Treize discovered a whole new world. People suddenly wanted to send horses to him to be educated, to be ridden and shown and then he got his biggest break. Relena Peacecraft offered him a proposition he couldn't refuse.

And the rest as they say is history.

With their meal finished, they left the restaurant and headed for the cinema. They made it with ten minutes to spare, grabbed a bucket of popcorn and found themselves a quiet spot towards the back of the theater to watch the movie. Both men thoroughly enjoyed the show and found the basis of it to ring a few familiar bells. It would seem that society hadn't changed all that much in its views of homosexual relationships over the years.

Zechs had managed to resist temptation during dinner, but now in the darkened theater he gave in to his desires and draped his arm around the back of the chair and across Treize's shoulders. He'd been pleased when the other man had leaned into him and rested his head against Zechs' shoulder. They'd watched a bit more of the movie like that before Treize let his hand drift down and rest on Zechs' thigh causing shivers of delight to course through Zechs.

As the movie progressed so they gravitated closer to each other until Zechs couldn't contain himself any longer and reached for Treize. He cupped the other man's cheek in his hand and tilted his head so he could gaze into the blue of Treize's eyes.

"God, you're gorgeous," murmured Zechs as he studied the handsome features.

Treize blushed in embarrassment and pleasure.

Slowly, Zechs brought his face closer until their lips met in a tender kiss. It was sweet and brief, leaving both of them craving more. Treize licked his lips, savoring the tingles from the all too brief touch and then decided to go for broke. He leaned back in and took Zech's lips in a more passionate kiss.

They continued to watch the movie, exchanging kisses from time to time, both getting more and more comfortable with each other. When the movie finished they were reluctant to break apart and leave. Arriving back at Treize's home, Zechs had been invited in for a coffee. They sat together on the couch discussing different things and gradually moving closer to each other.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Zechs asked as he took the empty coffee cup from Treize's hand and set it on the table next to his own and then moved closer.
"I had a lovely evening," replied Treize. "Good food, a good movie and lovely company."

Zechs carefully wrapped his arms around Treize and drew his close. Lips sought out lips and connected in a passionate kiss. The kisses become more heated and deeper as their excitement rose. Zechs could feel himself getting hard and as much as he would have loved to bed the man he was with, he intended to take things slow. Idly, Zechs' lips traced butterfly kisses over Treize's jaw and throat, his hands rubbed against Treize's back in a soothing motion.

Treize was getting turned on, he'd not been with anyone in a while and Zechs was simply the most stunning creature he'd been with in a long time. He leaned his head back to allow better access to his throat, encouraging Zechs to continue.

Hands began to roam, brushing over chests and seeking out nipples. Gradually they grew bolder, hands descended to pants and cocks were fondled through the fabric of each man's slacks. Treize moaned. "Please."

"What do you want?" Zechs asked as he palmed the hardness between Treize's legs.

"Please. I need to come. Touch me."

With a soft chuckle, Zechs unzipped Treize and slipped his hand inside. He found Treize's cock and drew the glistening organ out. He curled his fingers around the turgid shaft and began to stroke.

Pure pleasure coursed through Treize as Zechs stimulated his aching cock, the strokes sure and firm, teasing him to further hardness and promising relief. Treize's hips began to thrust, pushing himself into Zechs' hand and the ever increasing pleasure.

Zechs had never seen a more gorgeous sight than Treize in the throes of pleasure. His hand sped up, encouraged by the moans and whimpers coming from the other man and knowing he was the one to cause them made his own cock ache with need. Still stroking Treize, Zechs reached to his own pants and lowered the zipper, pulling his throbbing shaft free and beginning to stroke it as well. His hand though was stilled a moment later and replaced with Treize's.

"Let me," Treize said in a husky tone and began to stroke Zechs' length.

They sprawled against each other on the couch, hands pumping in tandem, soft moans and groans coming from their respective throats as their orgasms drew ever closer. Treize was the first to lose it. He gave a sharp cry and stiffened as his seed began to pulse from the slit and coat Zechs' hand. Moments later, Zechs joined him in ecstasy as his own release flooded from his tip and splashed against Treize's hand.

As their climax began to recede and breathing returned to normal, Treize opened his eyes and released Zechs' cock. "That was amazing," he murmured.

"I agree," huffed Zechs. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure," returned Treize and reached in for a kiss. They shared a few more kisses before Treize fetched a wash cloth and they cleaned themselves up. Not long after that Zechs had taken his leave with the promise to call the next day and arrange another date.

~ End Flashback ~

"Hello, Treize," Zechs said in his deep voice as the rider brought the gray to a halt beside the group.

"Good to see you again, Zechs," replied Treize. He turned his attention briefly to Heero. "I think that
should do him for today."

"Hai, I agree. We can take him back up and unsaddle."

Treize dismounted, Duo took the reins and began to lead Zero back towards the stable block. Thinking that they had a moment to themselves, Zechs gave Treize a quick peck on the lips. Duo caught it out the corner of his eye and smiled to himself. It would appear he'd been correct in his assumption that the pair were a couple.

With Zero unsaddled and turned back out into the paddock, the four went up to the house to share a coffee and compare notes on the gray and his jumping. Duo was also eager to find out exactly when the pair had become a couple but thought he'd better wait until after the more serious discussion was out the way.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, Duo set the mugs out while everyone sat around the kitchen table. Duo spotted the mail on the side bench and went to pick it up. Catherine must have brought it down from the surgery while they were busy in the paddock with Zero. Duo flipped through the pile and found one addressed to Heero. It looked pretty official.

"Hey, Heero. Mail for you," Duo said and passed over the envelope. "Looks official," he added.

"Thanks." Heero took the letter and opened it, withdrawing the letter from inside and opening it out to read. Beside him Zechs and Treize continued their conversation, their voices low. Heero read the letter from start to finish, then read it again, a slow smile spreading over his face as he did a quick calculation in his head.

"Good news?" Treize asked as he noticed the look on Heero's face.

"I'll say."

Three faces turned in Heero's direction.

"It's from the Showjumping Board. The camp is to be held in the Fenwick County, nine weeks from now. That means I will still be able to attend. This cast should be off in seven to eight weeks so I should be okay to ride and try out for the team."

"That's great news!" Treize said knowing he would probably have a similar letter awaiting him when he got home.

"About time you had some good news for a change," Zechs stated with a smile. "Congratulations."

Heero turned to Duo, the only one who hadn't said anything and he frowned. Duo was reading his own mail, a look of disbelief and then fury spreading over his handsome features.

"Duo?" Heero questioned. "What's wrong?"

"That fucking bitch! This has to be her fault."

"Duo? What's going on?" Heero asked. Treize and Zechs sat in silence, not knowing what to think or say.

"This!" Duo snarled and waved the letter in his hand around.

"Who's it from?" Heero asked.

"The Australian Veterinary Board. I'm under investigation for the possibility of misuse of drugs."
[1] The whip is what's known as an artificial aid, the natural ones being hands, seat, legs and voice. When using the whip to re-enforce a leg aid it should always be used in the same place as the leg is applied.

[2] Brokeback Mountain: I'm pretty sure that most of you out there would have heard/seen the movie. For those who haven't, you don't know what you've missed. It's a love story between two gay cowboys and how society deals with such relationships. Heath Ledger is simply droolworthy in it as is Jake Gyllenhaal. On a side note, Heath is from here in Perth, West Aussie.
Chapter 30

"You're under investigation for what?" Heero asked, unable to comprehend what his lover had said.

"Misuse of drugs," snapped Duo.

"There must be some mistake," Heero stated as he quickly closed the distance between himself and his lover. Heero took the letter from Duo's hand and read it. His brows knitted together as his eyes perused the page. "This is bullshit! Duo, you've never misappropriated drugs."

"This is all the work of that pink bitch. Oh, I know the AVB can't disclose who has filed the allegation against me, but I know it has to be her. She swore she would get me after we clashed at the hospital..." Duo quickly shut his mouth as he realized what he'd said.

"Duo?"

"Ummm... Yes, Heero?"

"What clash at the hospital?"

"Ahh... Well, umm, you see..."

"Heero, it's not exactly what it would seem," Treize said, trying to come to Duo's defense.

Heero spun around. "What do you know about it?"

"Errr, Zechs and I sort of walked in on the end of it."

Heero's eyes narrowed. "Duo, I think you have some explaining to do. I want to know exactly what happened and why everyone else seems to know about this and I don't." Heero's tone was harsh, he was majorly pissed off that no-one had told him anything about an altercation between his lover and Relena.

With a sigh of defeat, Duo collapsed into a kitchen chair and took a long drink from his coffee. "It happened just as they'd taken you from the trauma room to the theater. I came out into the corridor and that pink parasite was there. She set on me straight away, accusing me of all sorts of things..."

Duo explained all he could remember about the argument he'd had with Relena in the corridor of the hospital. He didn't leave anything out, he figured he'd already hurt Heero enough by not telling him in the first place. With a heavy heart he spilled it all. Treize finished off by adding his bit to the mix, including the 'phone call he'd gotten from Dorothy warning him that Relena was up to something.

"She knew she wouldn't be able to get a charge of assault to stick so I guess she thought she'd try some other way," Duo sighed. "And this is it."

"Duo? Why didn't you tell me about the argument when I came out of surgery?"

"I didn't want to upset you. You'd just undergone major surgery, Heero. You were all banged up from the fall and emotionally fragile with the loss of Taurus on top. I didn't want to give you anything else to worry about."

"And it didn't occur to you to tell me a day later?"
"Umm... I'd kinda forgotten about it with everything that was going on. Heero, I'm sorry. I know I should have told you and I didn't. That was wrong of me."

"Yes, it was," Heero replied and then his tone softened. "I can understand your reasons for not telling me at the time; however, in future, regardless of my 'condition' I want to know what's going on, especially if it concerns me. I can fight my own battles you know."

"I know, Heero." Duo gave a sigh of defeat and cradled his head in his hands.

"She actually clocked you one with her crutches?" Heero said with a snicker.

Duo peeked out from behind his bangs to see Heero smirking at him. "Yeah, she did."

"And you slapped her?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Damn! I wish I'd still been there to see that."

"Heero!"

Heero laughed.

Feeling the tension begin to leave the room, Treize relaxed a little and then smiled as he felt Zechs entwine his fingers with his own under the table.

"What exactly does the letter say, Duo? What sort of misappropriation of drugs are you supposed to have done?" asked Zechs.

Duo picked the letter up from where Heero had dropped it to the table and began to read it out.

"Dear Doctor Maxwell,

The Australian Veterinary Board has received a complaint in relation to you and your practice. The complaint alleges that there has been a breech of ethics involving the misuse of drugs.

As you can appreciate this is a serious allegation and the Board is bound by law to investigate any and all complaints that are lodged with it.

One of the Board's Investigation team members will be contacting you shortly to arrange a call out to your practice and speak with you in regard to this allegation. The Board also requires that you have for its inspection a full copy of all your practice records including drug itineraries, stock take files, receipts and client files.

We thank you for your cooperation and hope to have this matter cleared up quickly with minimal disruption to yourself and your practice.

Yours sincerely
Harold Green
Secretary - Investigations Department AVB."

Zechs let a low whistle pass his lips. Treize gave a sigh, Heero looked thoughtful.

"It's a good job then that I've only just gone through all your records and loaded them onto Nrobbuts' database and burnt a back up copy," said Heero. "All the practice information is on there except clients for the past couple of days. I was planning on adding them to the database tomorrow."
"Nrobbuts?" Treize questioned. Zechs looked just as mystified.

"The computer," Duo replied absently. "You have all the records on there?"

"Everything, Duo. I was bored so I went right back to the very start of your practice and put all the information in the database. All the clients are there, case histories, income and expenditure, order forms for equipment; and a complete list of all drugs you've ever purchased and what is currently in stock. It's just a simple case of cross referencing the client files to the drugs and you can see immediately where the drugs were dispensed, how much and by whom." Heero couldn't help but feel a little smug.

"Heero, you're a life saver," Duo cried and grabbed his boyfriend, hugging him tightly. Zechs gave a low whistle. "And you ride horses? Shit, Heero, you could go into business for yourself just compiling records for companies!"

Heero blushed. "I'm actually an accountant by trade but gave it away when Treize offered me a position in his stable. Riding and competing has always been the one thing I've longed to do."

"If you ever decide to give the horses away, let me know, I'm sure I could get you a job at Oakford doing the books and keeping the records straight," smiled Zechs.

"Not a chance, Zechs," Duo interrupted. "If Heero ever decides to give up the nags he's got a full time position here. Besides, he's my boyfriend, I don't share and it looks like you have your own anyway." Duo gave the shocked looking blonde a knowing look.

"Ahh..."

Heero raised an eyebrow and looked questioningly to Duo. This was the first he'd heard that Zechs had a boyfriend.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Duo said with a smile. "When did you two get together?"

"Pretty much the day that Heero had his fall," replied Zechs.

"He asked me out on a date when we were on our way to the hospital," added Treize.

"Why am I always the last to find out anything around here?" said Heero with a sigh.

"You can't blame this one on me, Heero," Duo replied. "I had an idea these two liked each other but wasn't completely sure until today."

"Congratulations," said Heero with a warm smile. "I hope you're both happy together."

"Thanks, both of you. It means a lot to us," replied Zechs with a warm smile of his own.

"I think this calls for a bit of a celebration. Treize and Zechs together and your camp coming up, Heero. Looks like you still have a chance of making the cup team," said Duo with a grin. "I think I have a bottle of sparkling grape juice." Duo disappeared into the pantry and returned moments later banishing a bottle in triumph. "Knew I had it in there somewhere. Sorry it's not alcoholic, but Heero and I rarely drink."

"No need for apologies, Duo. I've got the evening shift at Oakford so wouldn't be able to drink anyway," replied Zechs.

"And I have to drive home and work Goose yet," stated Treize.
Duo opened the bottle and added some ice to four glasses before pouring the contents of the bottle into them. He handed one to each person and picked up his own. Raising the glass, Duo proposed a toast. "Here's to a happy relationship between Zechs and Treize and to both Heero and Treize making it into the Nations Cup team try outs."

"And here's to Duo being cleared of any accusations," added Treize.

"Hear, hear," murmured Zechs and raised his glass.

"And here's to Relena being abducted by aliens."

Three faces turned to stare at Heero.

"What? One can always hope," he said in innocence.

Duo shook his head, a wry grin on his face. "Heero, we seriously need to work on your sense of humor."

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Dorothy walked into the sitting room carrying a tray with a china tea service on it. She set the tray down upon the coffee table and proceeded to remove the cups, saucers, milk jug and sugar bowl, placing them on the coffee table along with the plate of cakes. Relena was reclining in the large armchair, foot resting upon a foot stool and reading her mail. A smile began to tug at the corner of her lips and Dorothy could see a look of satisfaction appearing in those blue eyes. Alarm bells began to ring in Dorothy's head.

"Afternoon tea is served, Miss Relena."

"Ah. Thank you, Dorothy."

"Would you like me to pour?"

"Yes, please."

Dorothy poured the tea and handed Relena a cup. She poured one for herself and sat down opposite her mistress. She watched as Relena put the letter to the side and took a sip of the tea. "Good news?"

Dorothy asked.

Relena looked up, confused. "Pardon?"

"The letter. I take it there's good news in it as you were smiling."

"Ah."

Relena smiled again. "I guess you could say that."

She took another sip of her tea. Dorothy waited patiently for Relena to continue; her patience was soon rewarded. "It shouldn't be long now before Heero is free from that pansy of a so called vet."

"Oh?"

Dorothy felt a cold chill run down her spine. Just what had Relena done now?

"It came to me a few nights ago," Relena continued. "I know that vet is pushing himself onto Heero, that Heero isn't interested in men."

Relena shuddered as she spoke, the thought of her Heero being forced like that causing her to feel nauseous. "It occurred to me that Heero must be under the influence of something for him to allow that faggot to touch him. Being a vet he has access to drugs, drugs that can affect a person's reasoning."

Dorothy swallowed, the chill of fear growing stronger. Surely Relena wasn't suggesting that Doctor
"I'm sure that vet is giving Heero something, some sort of drug to make him docile and receptive to his perverted ways. Well, I'm not about to stand back and let that happen."

"Shit! Relena *was* suggesting that. With a dry mouth and feeling of dread building in her gut, Dorothy forced herself to ask the question. "Relena? What did you do?"

Relena smiled and took another sip of her tea. "Why, I merely made a phone call to the Veterinary Board and explained my concerns to them. This letter is to let me know that they have acknowledged my concerns and are investigating the matter." Relena looked smug. "I'm sure that once they begin their investigation they will undoubtedly find that that Maxwell creature has been misusing drugs and strike him from the registry or whatever it is they call it."

Dorothy didn't know what to say. Her blood ran cold at the thought of Doctor Maxwell being investigated for something she was certain he was innocent of. Something like this could ruin his career, innocent or not. Dorothy couldn't sit back and watch something like this happen, her sense of fair play wouldn't allow it. "Relena, what if you're wrong?"

Relena gazed at her housekeeper. "No, there's no way I could be wrong."

"Has it ever occurred to you that Heero is gay? That he's a willing participant in a relationship with this vet? Have you any idea what damage you can do with your accusations, especially when they are proven to be completely unfounded? You do realize that if Doctor Maxwell is cleared of any accusation that he has every right to sue you for slander?"

"That won't happen. Heero isn't gay, that vet has to be giving him something!"

"Relena, why don't you just ask Heero if he's gay or not?"

"I had thought about that, but with him being under the influence of whatever drug that vet's giving him he would be compelled to lie."

Dorothy frowned. "Relena, I sincerely hope you know what you're doing."

"Of course I do. You'll see. Once this investigation is over that faggot will get what he deserves and Heero will be free from his torment."

Draining the last of her tea, Dorothy placed her cup back on the tray and got up. "I have duties to finish," she said curtly and exited the room. She couldn't stand to be in the same room as Relena at the moment, the depths her boss had sunk to had filled Dorothy with a loathing for the woman. She headed for the phone and called Treize.

Fifteen minutes later, Dorothy returned the hand piece to the cradle and headed for the kitchen to think. She'd told Treize all about Relena's confession and was surprised to learn that Treize already knew about the accusation. She listened patiently as Treize told her about the letter arriving at the Maxwell Veterinary practice and while the complainant's name had not been given, Duo and the rest of them knew it had to be Relena. She felt a little better after Treize informed her that Maxwell had all his records and should be able to prove his innocence. Treize was shocked when Dorothy had told him of Relena's theory that Heero was being influenced by drugs and assured Dorothy he would let both Heero and Duo know all that Dorothy had told him.

Knowing there wasn't anything more she could do, Dorothy shoved the thoughts aside and began to chop up the vegetables for the evening meal with a little more vigor than was really necessary.
After receiving Dorothy's phone call and warning of what Relena was up to, Treize thought the matter over. Glancing at the clock he made up his mind and went to the phone. He dialed the number for Duo's practice and waited for the call to connect.

"Maxwell Veterinary Practice."

"Ah, Catherine. It's Treize Khushrenada here. I wonder if it would be possible to have a quick word with Doctor Maxwell?"

"Mr Khushrenada, nice to hear from you. Doctor Maxwell is with a client at the moment, if you would care to hold I can get him to speak with you as soon as he comes out of the consult."

"Thank you. I'll hold." The line switched to some pleasant music and Treize found himself humming along with it. He wasn't on hold for long.

"Treize, Duo here. What can I do for you?"

"Duo, I have some information I think you might find interesting. It's relating to this accusation against you. I don't want to tell you over the phone so would it be possible for me to call around later?"

Duo frowned. "Information?"

"Yes. Dorothy, Relena's housekeeper called me. I think you have a right to know what's going on."

Now Duo's interest was really piqued. "Hang on a sec, Treize."

Treize heard the sound of a hand being put over the receiver and muffled voices in the background before Duo's voice returned.

"I should be finished with consults around seven fifteen. If you want to come over for seven thirty that would be good. Heero's at the house anyway so if I'm not there by the time you get there I won't be far off."

"Okay. I'll see you soon then. Bye, Duo." Treize hung up and paused, deep in thought before going through to the kitchen to see if Jenny had his dinner ready. He had enough time to eat before heading over to Duo's.

Heero opened the door to admit Treize. Duo had let him know that Treize would be coming over with some information for them. "Evening, Treize," Heero said as Treize stepped inside. "Duo's in the shower, he won't be long. Come through to the lounge room."

"Thanks." Treize followed his pupil and took a seat. "How did the hospital appointment go yesterday?"

"Fine. They took another x-ray and the bone is starting to knit back quite nicely. The stitches have almost dissolved as well and from what they can tell the wound has healed okay."

"I'll bet you'll be glad to get that cast off," Treize said as he made himself comfortable.

"Yes, I will. Doc says it should be off in about six weeks."
Conversation paused as Duo entered the room, shirtless and wearing a pair of sweatpants. Treize silently admired the vet's physique.

"Hey, Treize."

"Duo," Treize responded.

Duo sat on the couch next to Heero. "What is it you have to tell me?" Duo knew he was being blunt and straight to the point and he didn't really care. Treize had said he had information for him and Duo wanted to know what that information was.

Treize ran a hand through his hair and then fixed the vet with his gaze. "Dorothy called me. Seems Relena told her all about her call to the AVB and what she is accusing you of." Taking a deep breath, Treize explained everything Dorothy had told him. When he'd finished he sat back and watched the various emotions playing over the two faces before him. They went from shock to disbelief and finally settled on anger.

"That fucking cow is accusing me of drugging Heero so I can have sex with him? I don't believe it!" Duo's eyes were wide.

"That's utter bullshit!" Heero growled. "Duo's never done anything like that in his life!"

"I know that and you two know that," said Treize. "Problem is, Relena believes it to be the case and hence the accusation."

Duo was livid. "I'll sue that woman for slander, the bitch. Once this investigation is over I'll take this to my lawyers and have that fucking pink parasite in court so quick and take her for every fucking thing that I can. I'll show her she can't mess with me."

Heero appeared to be deep in thought.

"I'm sorry, Duo I never thought she would go to these sorts of lengths. I wish there was something I could do." Treize felt bad about all this, he was the one that had introduced Heero to Relena in the first place.

"Not your fault, Treize," Duo replied.

"Duo?" Heero spoke. "I'll make an appointment with Doctor Po tomorrow and have blood tests done."

"Huh?"

"I'll have Doctor Po take blood and run tests on it to prove that the only drugs I'm on are the ones given to me by the hospital for my injuries. If I'm correct in my thinking, any drug you were to give me to render me compliant to your advances would remain in my system for a while. A blood test would show any traces of those drugs. Also I take it those types of drugs would need to be administered intravenously and the drugs I'm taking are oral. Surely there would be signs of needle holes where the drug was administered?"

Duo stared at his boyfriend as Heero's words sunk in. "You know, you have a point there, Heero."

"It's one way to disprove Relena's accusation. Blood tests combined with your drug records should be enough to refute it," mused Treize.
"It certainly wouldn't hurt." Duo gave a smile and then hugged Heero. "What would I do without you?" he murmured and then kissed his lover.

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Heero duly made the appointment with Sally Po and had the necessary tests done. He confided in the doctor about his and Duo's relationship as well as the accusations aimed at Duo and hence the request for the blood tests.

Doctor Po was professional as always. She didn't comment on their relationship, but accepted it, something Heero was grateful for. She did however have a few choice words to say regarding the accusation against Duo.

The blood tests were sent off top priority and came back within an hour, negative to everything other than the antibiotics and anti-inflammatories that Heero was taking for his injuries. Sally also went over Heero with a fine toothed comb looking for any possible injection sites and came up blank. With the tests done, Sally wrote up a report and filed it away in Heero's records. When the Board's investigator came out to Duo's practice to commence his investigation, Doctor Po's contact details would be passed on and the investigator given permission to contact Doctor Po and receive a copy of the report on Heero's blood tests.

Feeling a lot happier than he had yesterday, Heero left the doctor's office and headed back home to bring Duo up to speed with the situation.

***

Another two weeks passed without any further incidents occurring. Zero was working nicely on the flat for Duo and jumping well for Treize. Heero was itching to get back into the saddle and ride himself and Duo had a hard time trying to placate his frustrated lover. Heero and Treize had both received further information on the training camp, details of the property the camp would be held at as well as an outline of what they would be doing in the lead up to the final team selection.

The camp was to be held in the Fenwick county which was the next county over to Salsbury, Heero decided he would drive over every day instead of staying the week. Duo was relieved to hear that as he wasn't sure if he could take a whole week being parted from his lover and there was no way he could take time off from the practice. He'd already taken far too much time off and it wasn't fair to Hilde to ask her to work his shifts again.

"One tablet twice a day, Mrs. Chandler, morning and night and that should see Suzie on the road to recovery. There's a ten day course there and you should start to see a difference in a couple of days. If she gets any worse or there's no improvement by the end of the ten days, bring her back. Kennel cough is highly contagious so I'd recommend keeping her away from other dogs until the course of antibiotics is finished."

"Thank you, Doctor Maxwell." The middle aged woman took the offered bottle of antibiotics.

Duo opened the door to the consulting room and allowed the woman to exit. "Be a good girl, Suzie," he said and patted the black and white head of the dog.

"Doctor Maxwell?"

"Yes?" Duo straightened up.

Mrs. Chandler lowered her voice to barely a whisper, darted a look from side to side and then leaned in close. "There's rumors going around the town that you and that Mr. Yuy are... well, more than just
friends."

Duo sucked in a harsh breath. Looked like it hadn't taken that pink parasite long to set the rumor mill to work.

Mrs. Chandler patted Duo's arm. "I know I speak not just for myself but for a lot of your clients. We don't care what the rumors say and fully intend to remain clients of your practice. Personally I think it's about time you got yourself settled down and Mr. Yuy is such a nice man." Mrs. Chandler smiled. "Make sure you're happy and that he treats you right."

Duo felt like he'd been sucker punched. Tears welled in his eyes and he hastily blinked them away. "Thank you, Mrs. Chandler. You have no idea how much that means to me," he replied softly.

"Stay true to your heart, young man. You're a wonderful vet and deserve to be happy."

If the woman hadn't been a client, Duo would have hugged her and planted a kiss to her cheek. He refrained and managed to thank her again.

Mrs. Chandler nodded and left to pay her bill. Duo stepped back into the consulting room for a moment to gather his composure. If what Mrs. Chandler said was true then it looked like he wouldn't lose as much of his clientele as he'd thought he would once the rumors started flying. Oh, he was bound to lose some, he knew that, but it was heartening to know there were those out there that supported his and Heero's relationship.

With his composure back intact, Duo smoothed down his white coat and went back out to the waiting room to collect the next file and see the next client.

"Doctor Maxwell. There's someone to see you," Catherine said as Duo walked out to collect the client file.

"Oh?"

"A Mr. Gregory from the AVB."

Duo froze, his heart plummeted to his feet and he had a moment's trouble breathing. He'd known the investigator would be out soon, he just hadn't expected it today. "Where is he?"

"In the waiting room."

"Do I have any more clients?"

"No. Mrs. Chandler was the last one."

"Okay."

"I'll go down and clean the kennels up and prepare the theater for surgery. Call me if you need me." Catherine stood up and exited the small office come reception area to give Duo the privacy he would need to speak with the investigator.

"Thank you, Catherine. Could you please go down to the house and find Heero first for me? I'll need him here as well."

Catherine nodded and gave Duo's arm a squeeze. "It will all be okay, Duo."

Duo took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. He had nothing to hide, everything was on disc or hard drive, all his records were up-to-date and everything accounted for. Steeling himself,
Duo ran his hand through his bangs and prepared to step into the waiting room.

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Duo pushed open the door to the waiting room and forced himself to smile despite the nervousness he was feeling. "Mr. Gregory?" he asked as he stepped forward and offered his hand.

Mr. Gregory was a large man, all bulk and a good six foot tall. The bulk though wasn't fat, it was all muscle, something Duo realized when their hands connected and his was shaken firmly.

"Yes. Doctor Duo Maxwell?"

"That's me," replied Duo as their hands parted and his dropped back to his side.

"Doctor Maxwell, you know why I'm here?"

"Yes, I do. The Board sent me a letter to tell me they would be sending out an investigator."

Mr. Gregory reached inside his suit jacket and fished around in his pocket. Pulling his hand out he showed Duo his identification badge. "As is always the case when the Board receives a complaint we have to investigate. I wish to stress that you are completely innocent of any and all charges until the investigation is complete and then, depending on the findings you may or may not be charged with an offense."

"Thank you. I understand."

"Good. Are you aware of the allegations against you?"

"I think so. According to the letter I received I've been accused of misusing drugs. Although it didn't clarify in what way and who made the complaint."

"That is pretty much correct. I cannot divulge the exact nature of the complaint, nor can I tell you who lodged the complaint at this stage. Depending on the outcome of my preliminary investigations that information may be forthcoming."

"I thought as much," Duo said. "Look, Mr. Gregory. I know you have to investigate and I can assure you that all my records are accurate, that you won't find anything to support these claims. I also have a very good idea of who lodged the complaint and exactly what the nature of that complaint is. Once you have completed your investigation and find that the allegations are completely unfounded I'd like to discuss this matter with you, if that is acceptable. I'd like to have the chance to defend myself."

Mr. Gregory smiled. "Doctor Maxwell, at the conclusion of my investigation I'd be happy to discuss this matter with you, providing I find no evidence to back the complaint. I can assure you that the Board does not take these sorts of complaints lightly for obvious reasons. Likewise, if the complaint is found to be unwarranted then the Board can take action against the complainant as it sees fit."

"That's all I ask," Duo smiled back.

A light knock was heard on the waiting room door and Duo turned to open it. "Heero, thanks for coming up." Duo stepped to the side to allow Heero to enter. "Mr. Gregory, I'd like you to meet my accountant, Heero Yuy. Heero is responsible for keeping all the bookwork, files and relevant records pertaining to the practice up-to-date."
"Nice to meet you, Mr. Gregory," Heero said. "I'd shake hands with you but as you can see..."

Mr. Gregory took in the plaster cast that adorned Heero's right arm. "No problem, Mr. Yuy. What happened?"

"I took a fall from a horse, broke the upper arm."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Heero shrugged. "These things happen, thank you for your concern though. Now, Doctor Maxwell has informed me of the Board's investigation and I have everything pertaining to the practice on the hard drive of the computer. It's all backed up on disc as well. If you wish to see the paper invoices to confirm the information on the computer I have it all in the filing cabinet."

Mr. Gregory looked impressed. "Thank you. I'll start with looking over the records on the computer if that's okay. Once I locate the area I'm looking for I will need to have it verified by the paper side."

"Certainly. If you would like to come this way, Mr. Gregory, I'll set you up on the computer." Heero turned to walk to the waiting room door and take the investigator through to the office and Nrobbuts.

Mr. Gregory followed with Duo bringing up the rear, silently praying that Nrobbuts would behave itself.

Heero fired up the computer and quickly brought up the program that had all Duo's records on it. He typed in a few commands and all the individual files were displayed. "All you need to do is click on whichever file you need and it will open up to sub folders. All are named according to year, month and the like, depending on which file you choose. For example," Heero clicked on the file named 'Clients'. The file opened to reveal several sub folders. "The folder marked 'A to Z' contains the names and addresses of all the practice’s clients. The sub folder marked 'March' contains all the clients seen for that month along with the details of the consult. All of these are backed by the paper files in the filing cabinet."

"Thank you, Mr. Yuy. I have to say this is a very nice set up you have. It should make my job a lot easier and quicker and that means less of your time taken up."

Duo was beginning to feel a little lost and that he wasn't really needed. "Does anyone have any objection if I leave you two to it? I have a couple of animals in for surgery and I can be getting on with that while you're going through the records."

"That should be fine, Doctor Maxwell. I do have quite a bit to look through and I don't want to hold you up or disrupt your practice unnecessarily," replied Mr. Gregory.

"I'll stay here and help you locate whatever it is you need, Mr. Gregory, if that's okay with you," said Heero. "If you have any questions I'm sure I can answer them and if not, I can get Duo for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Yuy."

"I'll go get ready for surgery then," Duo said and left the pair to the computer and the records. Walking down the hall to the small operating theater, Duo felt the cold sweat on his skin and the slight trembling in his hands. He knew he'd done nothing wrong, had no case to answer to, but he couldn't shake the nervousness. He needed to get himself back in control, he had surgery to perform and he couldn't operate if his hands were shaking.

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Inserting the last stitch, Duo snipped the end and then dropped the needle into the kidney dish. He straightened up and looked at the neat row of stitches adorning the dog's side. "There you go, Sam, you should feel a lot better now when you wake up." Duo gave the sleeping dog a gentle pat before removing the kidney dish and its contents to the side. He lifted the dog and set him down on a blanket on the floor to wake up from the anesthetic.

"All finished?" Catherine asked as she returned from setting up the kennel ready for Sam to go back into once he was awake.

"Yeah," replied Duo.

"I'll start to clean up then."

"Thanks." Duo picked up the kidney dish that held the tumor he'd removed from Sam's side and moved across the theater to the side bench and microscope. Humming softly to himself he set the microscope up, fetched a couple of slides and placed a sliver of the tumor onto the slides. Peering down the microscope, Duo watched the tiny world unfold under the magnification. He checked the tumor cells, applying a chemical to the slide and noting the reaction. A smile lit his features and a soft sigh escaped his lips.

"What did the test say?" Catherine asked from where she was sitting beside the now awake Sam.

"It's benign."

"That's good." Catherine patted the dog, the grin wide on her face. "His owner will be happy."

"It shouldn't grow back either. I'm pretty sure I managed to get all of it," Duo smiled as he spoke. "I think you can go back to the kennels now, Sam."

"I'll take him," offered Catherine. "You might want to go and see how that investigator fellow is getting on."

"Thanks, Catherine." Duo really didn't fancy going back to the reception area. A glance at the clock told him he'd been in surgery for three hours. Blowing his bangs out of his eyes, Duo decided he really didn't have a choice, he'd better go and see what was happening, evening consults would be starting in another hour and Hilde would be coming in for those in about half an hour. Wearily, Duo left the theater and went back to the reception area.

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Heero had assisted Mr. Gregory wherever he could, fetching the paper records to confirm what was on screen. While the investigator couldn't reveal exactly what he was looking for due to confidentiality laws, Heero already had a good idea from the information Treize had given them.

Having spent the better part of the afternoon going through the drug orders for the practice, Mr. Gregory decided to call it a day. "Would you mind if I took the disc back to my hotel with me and continued to look through the records there?"

"I can't see why not," replied Heero. "I'll have to check with Doctor Maxwell first though."

"Of course. I just thought it would speed things up a bit. I can continue my investigation there and not disrupt the practice with my presence here. Any paper confirmation I need I can make a note of and check tomorrow when I return."

"How is it going?" Duo asked as he walked back into the reception area.
Heero brought Duo quickly up-to-date and requested permission for the investigator to take the disc back with him to the hotel. Duo agreed and Mr. Gregory bid them good evening. No sooner had the investigator left than Hilde arrived and Catherine reappeared. Both women were eager to hear how things were progressing, and between the two of them, Duo and Heero told them all they knew.

By the time they had finished, it was almost time to open up for evening consults. Heero left to go and bring the horses in, Duo promising to help just as soon as he'd called Sam's owner to let them know of the successful surgery. Catherine took up residence in the reception area and Hilde fetched her white lab coat and prepared for the evening consults.

* * *

Duo finished buckling up the leg strap and gave Scythe a friendly pat before leaving her stable and locking the door behind him. A moment later Heero emerged from Zero's stable and bolted that door.

"All finished?" Duo asked.

"Yeah. I'll just make up the morning feeds and that's everything done then."

"Okay, I'll go on up to the house and start cooking dinner." Duo gave Heero a soft kiss. "Don't be too long."

Heero watched as his lover left and then turned to make up the morning feeds.

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Stepping into the kitchen, Heero's nose was infiltrated by the smell of steak cooking. "Mmm... Something smells good."

"I thought we'd have something simple tonight. Steak, egg and chips," Duo replied.

Heero wandered over and wrapped his arm around Duo's waist. He nuzzled the vet's neck and then feathered kisses over it. Duo shivered at the touch and tilted his head to give Heero better access, access Heero was quick to take advantage of.

Duo could feel the familiar warmth spreading through his body with Heero's kisses. They hadn't been intimate since Heero's accident, Heero's injuries being the main reason, although the current investigation and Relena's obsession had also put a bit of a dampener on anything sexual. Duo moaned softly and turned around in his lover's one armed embrace. He wrapped his own arms around Heero's shoulders and partook of Heero's lips.

The kiss was sensual and slow, mouths meeting and melding together, moving softly against the other with genuine affection. Heero parted his lips in invitation, one Duo was quick to accept. Tongues entwined and rubbed languidly against each other, inner recesses were reinvestigated and each man let himself go with the overwhelming pleasure.

Heero moaned softly, Duo caught the moan and returned it with one of his own. Before things could go much further though, the smell of burning reached their noses.

"Shit! The steak!" Duo cried and quickly spun around to rescue the meat. Duo stared into the pan. "I hope you like your steak very well done, Heero," he said ruefully as he looked at the slightly blackened steaks.

"I normally have it medium rare," Heero replied in amusement and looking into the pan. "Although I don't mind it chargrilled occasionally."
"Charred is about right," Duo sighed.

Heero chuckled. "It doesn't matter, Duo. To be honest, I'd much rather have you for dinner."

Duo gazed into Heero's eyes and noted the hunger there. He swallowed and dropped the pan back to the stove before embracing his lover. Tingles ran from his head, lodging firmly in his groin before continuing on to his toes. He brushed his knuckles across Heero's cheek and then stole another kiss.

"I want you, Duo," Heero murmured, his voice thick.

"Are you sure, Heero? What about your arm?"

"Fuck my arm."

"I'd rather fuck you."

"Then why are you waiting? Take me to bed, Duo and make love to me."

"Your wish is my command." Duo pressed his lips firmly against Heero's and kissed his lover soundly. When they broke apart, Duo quickly turned everything off on the stove and followed his teasing boyfriend from the kitchen, along the hallway and into the bedroom. Once inside the bedroom, Duo found himself attacked by a demanding Heero. Even though Heero only had the use of one arm, he made sure to use that hand and arm to his full advantage.

Kissing Duo again, Heero's left hand set about undoing the buttons to Duo's shirt and then caressing the warm skin beneath. Fingers traversed the hard planes of Duos' chest stopping to tease at a nipple before continuing across and toying with the other one. Not satisfied with simply exploring Duo's chest, Heero's hand moved over the soft skin of Duo's belly, smirking as he felt the muscles twitch and shiver beneath his touch. He paused at the waistband of Duo's slacks and dipped a finger beneath, running lightly around the waistband and the sensitive skin.

Duo's breath hitched and a low moan escaped his mouth. Heero's fingers felt so good against his skin, he'd missed the gentle touch of his lover. Heat began to pool in his groin as Heero continued to stroke over his skin, slowly moving downwards towards his slacks. Duo was content to let Heero explore for the moment, his own hands would be occupied soon enough. Feeling the finger dip beneath the waistband of his slacks and then run teasingly around, Duo groaned and thrust his hips forward.

Removing his finger, Heero placed the palm of his hand flat against the growing bulge in Duo's pants and began to rub. His mouth sought Duo's again and proceeded to kiss his lover senseless. His own need was steadily rising, it had been far too long since they were last intimate together and while Heero knew that sex wasn't all there was to their relationship, it certainly played an important role.

Duo broke the kiss, his breathing labored as he rested his head in the crook of Heero's shoulder and moaned softly, "God, I want you, Heero."

"I want you too, Duo. I need you, need to feel you inside me, please."

One hand quickly moved to the front of Heero's pants and palmed the hardness there, the other drifted along Heero's spine and cupped an ass cheek, squeezing gently. Duo began to nibble along Heero's neck as his hands kneaded both the front and rear of Heero's body. Heero groaned and tried to press himself into that teasing hand at his groin, his own hand shifting to try and undo the button and zipper of Duo's slacks.
Heero's hand fumbled, unable to release Duo's pants and allow his hand to investigate the treasures within. Heero grunted in frustration and tried again, only to be foiled once more by the stubborn button.

Duo chuckled softly at Heero's frustration. "Need a hand there, Heero?" he questioned softly.

"I want you naked and inside me," Heero growled. "Now."

"Impatient, aren't you?"

"It's been too long, Duo. I need you, need to have you buried inside me."

Duo could well understand Heero's need, his own was bubbling away, threatening to erupt very soon if he didn't take action now. He need to be buried inside Hero's hot channel, needed to feel the strength and warmth of Heero's body, needed that feeling of belonging to take away all the hurt and anger that had plagued him these past few weeks.

In short, Duo needed to be reassured that Heero still wanted him, desired him and not that pink menace.

Oh, he knew in his heart that Heero held no feelings of attraction for Relena, but he needed to feel Heero's body surrounding him, wanted to hear the moans and whimpers of pleasure caused by his ministrations falling from Heero's lips and most of all, he was desperate to hear Heero's voice calling his name as they reached their orgasms together.

With a swiftness Duo didn't know he possessed, he quickly had both his and Heero's pants off, shirts gone, underwear but a memory and the pair of them on the bed. They lay alongside each other, fingers and hands wandering over heated skin while lips moved languidly together. Pressing hard against Heero's naked form, Duo rubbed himself along Heero's belly and thighs, feeling Heero's hardness pressing against his own flesh in return. Moving a hand away from Heero's body for a moment, Duo blindly fumbled in the bedside drawer for the lube.

Slicked fingers began to trace along his cleft, stopping to tease lightly against the tiny opening and then caressing the crevice again. Moans escaped Heero's lips and his hips began to undulate, desperate to draw that teasing finger inside his body. A low chuckle rumbled in Duo's chest and then that finger pushed forth, passing through the defensive muscle of Heero's anus and entering the hot channel.

"Yes," hissed Heero as he was penetrated at last by that questing digit. He spread his legs a little more, encouraging the vet to plunge deeper into his body.

Duo feathered kisses along Heero's neck and collar bone as he worked his finger inside and began the task of loosening Heero's passage and muscles. A second finger followed easily enough, the whimpers and moans falling from his lover's lips inflaming Duo's desire. A third finger wormed its way inside, Duo barely holding the groan as Heero's hips began to thrust, rubbing their cocks together while Heero rode those penetrating fingers.

Unable to wait any longer, Duo pulled his fingers out and fumbled for the lube. He found it and began to slather a generous amount over his aching length. Heero rolled completely onto his back, spreading his legs and raising them up to allow Duo easy access to his body.

"Shit, you're so hot, Heero," Duo breathed as his eyes wandered the body spread before him.

"Make love to me, Duo." Heero was tired of waiting. His cock throbbed, his balls were heavy and he had to have Duo inside him.
Duo's eyes softened as he settled between Heero's legs. Taking the base of his penis between his fingers, Duo guided himself to the stretched opening. He rubbed the sensitive head around the small hole, teasing both Heero and himself before he began to push steadily inside. The muscles of Heero's ass didn't want to let him in at first, then they grudgingly relaxed and Duo slid inside. It was like coming home to Duo. His cock slipped gently into Heero's sheath, heat surrounding him, muscles caressing every inch of his shaft as he steadily moved deeper into the rider's body.

Heero was acutely aware of Duo's cock, the nerve supply inside his passage ultra sensitive to the slow penetration. Heero closed his eyes and savored the feeling of being filled.

With his balls now pressed against Heero's ass, Duo grit his teeth and fought to regain his control. He paused, enjoying the sensations traversing his nervous system while he waited for Heero to adjust and let him know he was ready. The muscles rippled along his shaft, squeezing his length and Duo knew that was his lover's way of letting him know he was ready for Duo to move. Biting down on his lower lip, Duo began to pull out, slipping easily from Heero's channel until only the head of his cock remained inside and then pushing forward again to sink deep into paradise.

"Feels good," Heero groaned. "More, deeper." Heero shifted his legs and wrapped them around Duo's waist, locking his ankles together.

Having regained control over his rebellious hormones, Duo began to increase his pace, building the rhythm, varying the depth of his penetration and generally driving Heero wild with pleasure. Hips rolled steadily, the advance and retreat speeding up, the angle changing slightly to enable Duo to find Heero's sweet spot.

"Ahhhh!" Heero moaned, stars dancing in his head.

Grunting, Duo picked up the pace. Heero's passage began to clench a little around his shaft, Duo faltered for a moment with the added pleasure and then settled into the rhythm once more.

The dance began to build towards the finale, bodies heaved and rolled against each other, sweat glistened over muscle and skin. Soft grunts, whimpers and moans escaped throats while nerves sang with pleasure and desire. Duo managed to worm a hand between their frantically moving bodies and locate Heero's cock. His fingers curled around the shaft and began to stroke.

"Come for me, Heero." Duo's vision was beginning to blur, his body shaking from the effort of holding his orgasm at bay.

Heero couldn't hold his own release any longer. The tingling started in his toes and worked its way up until it hit his groin. Heat flooded his system, his balls tightened and he gave a keening cry.

As his lover cried out his passion to the four walls of the bedroom, Duo pushed as deep as he could get into Heero's sheath and screamed his own pleasure. Duo's back arched, he shuddered from head to toe as his seed left his cock and spurted deep into Heero's channel. Beneath him his lover also went rigid, thick creamy liquid erupting from the slit to coat Duo's hand and their respective bellies.

Sucking air greedily into his lungs, Heero rode his orgasm, the intensity of it leaving him stunned, sated and gloriously happy. Above him Duo convulsed slightly as his own orgasm tore through him, the vet's skin flushing while his breath came in gasps.

As the pleasure began to subside, Duo collapsed against Heero and then rolled to the side, Heero's warm body immediately following the movement and snuggling close. With Heero's head tucked under his chin, Duo relaxed and enjoyed the last ripples of his release.
They lay together, entwined until their minds and bodies returned to the present. Duo began to stroke his fingers along Heero's spine and press kisses to the mop of chocolate hair. "Thanks, Heero. That was wonderful."

Heero sighed contentedly. "I've missed that."

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to push you with your arm and all."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Duo, but thanks for thinking of me, anyway." Heero shifted and stole a kiss. "I love you, Duo Maxwell."

"Love you too, Heero." They shared a tender kiss. "Maybe we should get cleaned up a bit."

"Don't want to move, too comfy." Heero snuggled closer, he really didn't want to surrender his teddy bear.

Duo chuckled. "All right, but don't blame me when you're all itchy. Besides, we still haven't eaten yet."

"Not hungry right now, want to snuggle."

Duo smiled as his lover burrowed closer to him. "I guess we can snuggle for a bit longer," he said quietly and pulled Heero closer to him and enjoyed the feeling of his lover in his arms.

* * *

Mr. Gregory spent another two days going through the practice records, matching up the drug inventories with the dispensing of those drugs. With the way Heero had set everything up it was easy for him to locate all the information he needed. The more he investigated the more he became convinced that this complaint held no validity whatsoever.

He contacted headquarters again to advise on where he was with the current investigation and get a little more information on the complaint itself as well as the person making the complaint. Mr. Yuy assisted him when he needed it, as did Doctor Maxwell and Mr. Gregory found himself warming to the pair. He was nearly at the end of his investigation when Mr. Yuy came forth with information that left the investigator stunned to say the least.

Mr. Gregory was trying to match up a particular drug order with where it had been dispensed when Mr. Yuy spoke.

"Mr. Gregory?"

"Yes?"

"I know you can't reveal the name of the person making the complaint, nor can you reveal the exact nature of the allegation, but, I think I can save you some time here."

"Oh?" Mr. Gregory paused in his searching and turned to face the accountant.

"This is purely off the record, okay?"

"Fine with me."

Taking a deep breath, Heero began his explanation, starting with how Relena Peacecraft seemed obsessed with him, going through all the information up to when he had his fall. "So you see, Mr. Gregory, I'm certain that this Peacecraft woman is the one that lodged this complaint, and that she's
alleging Duo has drugged me in order to take advantage of me. You don't need to confirm or deny what I'm saying, but I can assure you that is not the case. I am in this relationship because I want to be, I am a homosexual and Doctor Maxwell has never tried to use drugs on me. I'm over the age of consent and I'm a willing partner in the relationship we share. This Peacecraft woman just can't seem to get that through her head and has tried everything in her power to break up our relationship. I can also prove that I am in no way under the influence of any drugs, other than those prescribed for me by my doctor. I took the liberty of having my GP, Doctor Sally Po, take a blood sample last week and run tests for any drugs in my system. She has those test results at her practice and I have given my written consent for her to release those results to the Board should you require them. I'm also happy to have further tests to prove Doctor Maxwell's innocence if you need me to."

Mr. Gregory sat with a frown on his face, obviously deep in thought for a moment. Slowly he raised his eyes and met Heero's clear, blue gaze. "Thank you for sharing that information with me, Mr. Yuy. That couldn't have been easy for you. As you said, I cannot confirm nor deny the allegation or the person concerned, but off the record, you are correct. As yet I have not found anything amiss with Doctor Maxwell's records, everything is or has been accounted for. I would like to contact your doctor though and obtain a copy of those blood test results if that is okay with you. Once I have those I should be able to wrap this investigation up within a day."

"I'll give Doctor Po's practice a call now and have them faxed right over, if that is acceptable?"

"That would be fine, thank you."

Heero went to make the call; Mr. Gregory resumed the last of his investigation, his mind busy processing all that Mr. Yuy had told him. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. Not only was this sort of frivolous allegation a waste of the Board's resources and time, but it was also tarnishing the name and reputation of what Mr. Gregory had deemed to be a genuinely kind and compassionate vet. It really got under his skin to know that there were people like that out there in society. With a grunt he returned to his investigation.

* * *

Duo bade the last client of the morning farewell and locked the door to the surgery. Returning to the reception area he found Catherine waiting for him.

"Mr. Gregory called, he will be around in an hour's time to speak with you regarding his findings."

"Thank you, Catherine." Duo felt the butterflies beginning to swarm in his stomach.

"I suggest you go back to the house and have a cup of coffee to settle your nerves, I'll page you when he gets here, if you like?"

"Thanks, I think I will." Duo gave the receptionist a smile and proceeded to take off his white lab coat and hang it on the back of the door. He made his way back to the house and put the kettle on. Looking out through the kitchen window he could see Heero in the paddock with Zero, the gray standing tied to the fence while Heero brushed vigorously at the gray coat. Making two mugs of coffee up, Duo went out to the paddock.

"Hey, what you doing?" Duo asked as he approached the paddock.

"Just thought I'd give him a good grooming," replied Heero as he straightened up and took the offered mug of coffee. "Thanks, Duo, you're a life saver."

Zero wuffled and tried to sniff Duo's mug. Duo pushed the inquisitive muzzle away.
"No, you don't, that's my coffee, Zero, not carrots," the vet chuckled.

Heero unclipped the lead rope and Zero, realizing he wasn't going to get any treats, wandered off and resumed his grazing.

"He's looking well," Duo stated.

"Yeah, his muscle tone is good, he should be fit enough for the camp," replied Heero.

"Mr. Gregory is coming back soon."

"Aa."

"He's finished his investigation and wants to discuss his findings."

Sensing Duo's nervousness, Hero moved closer and set his mug on top of the fence so he could wrap his arm around the vet's waist. Nuzzling against Duo's neck, Heero spoke softly. "It will all be okay, Duo. Mr. Gregory is a decent fellow and from what I can gather, there's nothing in the records to substantiate Relena's claim."

Duo sighed. "I know I'm innocent, Heero. I just can't help feeling nervous though."

Heero kissed the long haired man. "Love you."

Duo's beeper went off.

Duo grabbed the pager from his belt and looked at the small screen. "Show time. Mr. Gregory is up at the practice now."

"Then I suggest we go and talk to him," replied Heero and took Duo's hand in his.

Duo grabbed both coffee mugs with his free hand and allowed himself to be led back towards the surgery and Mr. Gregory, who held his future in his hands.

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tbc....
Walking into the reception area of the practice, Duo did his best to compose his features, forcing the concern and worry he felt to the recesses of his mind. Heero's warm hand that brushed briefly across his lower back gave him a small measure of comfort and he flashed his boyfriend a soft smile of thanks.

Catherine switched the phone over to the answering machine and left the three men alone, giving Duo's shoulder a small squeeze as she passed by. "I'll go do the kennels and assist Hilde in surgery. You know where I am if you need me. Good luck."

"Thanks, Catherine."

Mr. Gregory smiled at them as they entered and Catherine left. "Doctor Maxwell, Mr. Yuy."

"Mr. Gregory," Duo returned. "Please, be seated."

"Thank you."

The investigator took a seat and dropped the folder to the reception desk. Heero and Duo took seats opposite him; Duo's hands fidgeting in his lap, Heero appeared calm as always.

"Firstly I would like to commend you on an extremely well run and organized practice, Doctor Maxwell. Mr. Yuy here certainly keeps your records up-to-date and easy to navigate." Mr. Gregory reached for the folder and opened it. "I gather you are eager to know what the results of my investigation are."

Heero nodded. Duo tried not to appear nervous as he also nodded.

"I have yet to submit this written report to the Board and once I do, you will receive written confirmation from them as to the findings of this investigation, as well as a copy of the report. It is within my power though to inform you now as to the results of my findings." Mr. Gregory scanned down the page of notes he had. "In relation to the allegation that you, Doctor Maxwell, have been misusing drugs, I find one instance that I will require clarification of. In regards to the allegation that you have been using drugs to influence an individual, I find nothing to substantiate that claim and therefore find you innocent of that allegation."

Duo breathed a sigh of relief but then frowned. "What instance of misuse are you referring to, Mr. Gregory?" Duo wracked his brain trying to think of anything he'd possibly done to have the investigator querying him.

Heero also looked mystified. He couldn't recall Duo having given drugs to an animal illegally.

Mr. Gregory flipped over a couple of pages and then proceeded to read out a date, drug and dose, which couldn't be backed up by Duo's client records.

Suddenly it dawned on Duo exactly what the investigator was talking about.

Taurus.

"Mr. Gregory, I can explain that drug and dose. When Heero here had his fall, the horse he was
riding at the time also fell and injured itself quite severely. I attended the scene of the accident and arrived a few minutes after the ambulance had left with Mr. Yuy. The owner of the horse was pretty distraught and had called his own vet in but that vet hadn't arrived. He asked me to give the horse a painkiller, something to help the animal until his own vet could get there. Under the circumstances, I couldn't refuse and so I did. I can give you the contact details of the owner of the horse and the contact details of the vet that attended if you wish to verify my statement."

"Thank you, Doctor Maxwell. I would appreciate that, not that I don't believe you, but I have to have all the details for the records. You do realize that it is against the code of practice for one vet to treat another vet's animal without the consent of the consulting vet?"

"Yes, I do. I couldn't leave the animal in pain though. The injuries were very severe," replied Duo, his voice low.

"Under the circumstances, it was to the horse's benefit that Doctor Maxwell gave him a painkiller, at least his last hour was relatively painless," Heero said, the crack in his voice evident as he spoke of Taurus.

"I see. Doctor Maxwell, personally, I am in agreement with what you say you did, under circumstances where an animal is in extreme pain and in danger of hurting itself further it's only natural for you to want to help that animal. Sometimes I think the regulations are a little too strict in that area." Mr. Gregory smiled. "I'll contact the persons concerned and add that information to my report. The Board will be in touch with you pretty soon and I'd say you will be getting a reprimand for treating another vet's patient without that vet's consent, but it won't be anything severe. In regards to the other matter, the Board will notify the complainant of its findings and will also look into what action it will take in regards to this person, if any, over making such a frivolous complaint."

"Good," Duo muttered.

"Doctor Maxwell, when I first started my investigation you asked me to give you the opportunity to defend yourself should I find you innocent. I would very much like to hear your side of the story, why this person would want to make such an allegation against you."

Duo fiddled with the end of his braid for a moment and then spoke. "I take it that the person who lodged this complaint is one Relena Peacecraft?"

"That is correct."

"And that she alleged I was giving Heero here drugs to make him receptive to my advances?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Gregory, before I go any further I have a question for you. This investigation has caused a lot of disruption to my practice and my personal life, not to mention my social standing. Fortunately for me, most of my clients don't give a fig about my personal life; the fact that I'm gay doesn't bother them. There are a few people though who turn their noses up at me, have taken their animals elsewhere and generally shun me because of all this. What I want to know is, will the Board release a copy of the original complaint to me?"

"I can't say for certain that they will, although under the circumstances I'd like to think that they would. Why?"

Duo's eyes became hard. "I intend to sue that woman, Mr. Gregory. I want to take her to court and sue her for slander, false accusation, defamation of character and anything else my solicitors can pin
on her. She deserves it for all the crap she's put Heero and myself through."

"I see."

Running a hand through his bangs, Duo sighed. "This is my side of the story, Mr. Gregory. Hear me out and then tell me I'm wrong for wanting to take this delusional bitch to court." Duo proceeded to tell Mr. Gregory the entire tale, starting from when he'd first met Relena at a show to the altercation at the hospital.

Mr. Gregory sat quietly and listened. Some of it he already knew from Mr. Yuy's confession, but it would appear there was a lot more to this than he'd thought.

"She said she would get at me somehow, make me sorry, but I never thought she would pull a stunt like this," Duo finished.

"That's quite a story, Doctor Maxwell."

"It's all true too. As I said before, I have witnesses that will stand up in court and testify on my behalf as to some of the things she did. Now tell me I don't deserve to have the chance to pay her back for all of this."

"I'll do everything in my power to make sure you get a copy of that complaint. I'm sure that once I let the Board know what this woman has been up to, along with my findings, they will be happy to send you what you need. I'll be very surprised too if they don't take action of some sort themselves after hearing all that."

"Thank you, Mr. Gregory, for listening to my side of the story."

"It's been my pleasure, Doctor Maxwell, and I'm sorry for all the trouble that this complaint has caused both you and your partner. Also, I apologize for any inconvenience caused to your practice and yourself through my being here." Mr. Gregory stood up and offered his hand. "Thank you, Doctor Maxwell."

Duo also stood and shook the investigator's hand.

"And you too, Mr. Yuy. You have both been very cooperative and I'm sorry for all of this. I wish you both the very best." Mr. Gregory shook Heero's left hand, the motion a little awkward but completed nonetheless.

"Take care, Mr. Gregory, and if the Board has any further questions, feel free to contact me." Duo escorted the investigator out, Heero remained a few paces behind his partner.

"Good bye, Doctor Maxwell, Mr. Yuy."

"Good bye, Mr. Gregory."

Duo closed the door after the investigator had left and turned around slowly. Immediately he felt Heero's arm wrap around him and pull him close. He sighed and leaned into the warmth, letting it seep into his bones as his own arms wrapped around Heero.

"Congratulations, Duo. I knew you would be found innocent."

Duo chuckled softly. "I knew they wouldn't find anything to substantiate that claim, thanks to you and your skills, Heero." Duo moved his head back a little and stared into the blue oceans of his lover's eyes. "But I'm glad it's all over with."
"Me too." Heero reached forth and kissed the vet. "Maybe now we can get on with our lives."

"Amen to that," replied Duo softly. Then he smirked. "There's only one thing left to do now and then this case can be completely closed."

Heero quirked an eyebrow. He already had a good idea of what his lover was going to say next.

"I think it's time to call the solicitors and lodge a complaint of our own."

Heero shook his head in amusement. "Not wasting any time, are you," he stated.

"Nope. Not after what that pink parasite has put me through, Heero. Not to mention all the shit you've had to endure as well. No, it's time for pay back and by the time I'm finished with that pink piece of crap she's going to wish she'd never heard of Duo Maxwell. I'm going to put her through the mill alright; I'll grind her up and spit her out. Trust me, Heero, when I say 'hell hath no fury like Duo Maxwell when he's scorned'. She's gonna rue the day she was born."

Heero believed him.

* * *

One week later...

"Your mail is here, Miss Relena," Dorothy said as she brought several envelopes into the study where Relena was sitting at her desk, going through her blood stock records and filling out the service records for the stud.

"Thank you, Dorothy." Relena pushed the paperwork aside for the moment and took the envelopes.

"Would you like some tea?"

"Yes please, Dorothy, that would be nice." Dorothy departed to fetch the tea, Relena sifted through the envelopes, putting the bills to one side and then reaching for the first envelope in the remaining pile. Picking up the silver letter opener from her left, Relena slipped it inside and opened the letter.

Reading the contents she smiled to herself.

"Good news?" Dorothy inquired as she returned with the tea and spotted the smile on her mistress' face.

"Someone wanting to know if I'm standing Peacemillion at public stud and if so, what fee I will be charging for a service."

Dorothy poured the tea. "I thought you were going to stand him at stud."

"I am. I have an advert going into the next editions of the Hoofbeats and Horseworld magazines with all the details. I'm only going to take ten outside mares to him and they will have to be approved by me before they are accepted."

"How many of your own are you planning on putting to him?"

"Six. I've already worked out which mares should cross well with him and three of them have already been served. I'll have them pregnancy tested in about a month's time and see if they've taken."

"If you don't mind me asking, what fee are you putting on him?"
"Four thousand."

Dorothy let a small whistle pass her teeth. "That's a lot."

"He's worth it," replied Relena as she reached for another envelope in the pile after setting the current letter to the side to be replied to. Slitting open the next letter, Relena's face began to cloud as she perused the contents. Her eyes narrowed and her lips set into a firm line.

Dorothy noticed the change in demeanor and was quick to question it. "Relena? What's wrong?"

"This!" hissed Relena and shook the letter at Dorothy.

"What is it?"

"It's a letter from the Australian Veterinary Board. Here, read it," Relena snapped and tossed the letter to Dorothy. Obviously Relena wasn't happy about the letter. Dorothy picked it up from where it had landed on the desk and quickly read it.

"Well, I can't say I'm not surprised. I did try to warn you, Relena."

"I can't see how they couldn't find anything. It's obvious that my Heero is being influenced by some sort of drug, there's no way he would fraternize with that vet! Heero's not gay!" The woman was still determined to believe that Heero wasn't in a relationship with the vet, despite all evidence to the contrary.

"Relena, I think you should consider yourself very lucky that the Board isn't going to press charges against you for this."

"Press charges against me for what!? I'm not the one at fault here."

Dorothy picked the letter up again and began to read part of it aloud. "Having found no evidence whatsoever to confirm the complaint you have lodged against on Doctor Duo Maxwell, the Board has found Doctor Maxwell completely innocent of any such breech of practice. Furthermore, the Board has it on good standing that this complain was lodged by yourself for personal reasons; reasons that could be proven to be malicious in their intent. The Board does not take lightly such accusations and a lot of time, effort and money is spent to investigate such claims. In cases such as yours, where the complaint is unfounded and unwarranted, the Board may or may not take legal action against you for such frivolous accusations. In this case, the Board has decided not to take legal action, however, should you make a complaint of this nature again, or a complaint against Doctor Maxwell in the future and the Board finds it to be unwarranted, the Board will not be so generous. Also, as is common place in a case such as this, the details of the complaint have been forwarded to Doctor Maxwell and it is his decision if he should wish to pursue action against you..." Dorothy finished quoting from the letter and looked her boss in the eye. "I'd say you got off pretty lightly."

Relena sat and fumed. "He must have fiddled his books or something. Surely he has to keep records of what goes on in his practice, what drugs he uses. He must have falsified his records, I wouldn't put it past him," Relena muttered as she reached absenty for the next envelope in the pile. Briefly she glanced at the small logo and name in the corner before sliding the letter opener through it then paused and turned the envelope over again to look at the name once more. 'Gordon and Klink. Barristers and Solicitors' stared back at her.

"Gordon and Klink? Solicitors? I've never heard of them. I wonder what they're writing to me for? Oh, maybe I've been left something in someone's will." Relena quickly pulled the letter out from inside.
Dorothy suddenly had a bad feeling in her gut.

***

True to his word, Duo phoned the solicitors as soon as they went back to the house and set up an appointment for two days' time. After making the appointment he called Treize and filled the rider in on what had happened with the investigation and what his intentions were. Treize had no doubts that Duo would be found innocent of all charges and despite the fact that most of his showjumpers came from Relena's stud, he assured Duo he would be happy to help his cause in any way he could. He also said he would be happy to speak with the Board regarding the painkiller Duo had administered to Taurus on his request. Duo thanked the man and hung up, his next call being placed to Oakford and Zechs.

Speaking with Zechs, Duo once again related Mr. Gregory's findings also informed Zechs that the Board would probably be contacting him to verify that Duo had given Taurus a painkiller and that Zechs had been made aware of that when he arrived to treat the horse. Zechs didn't have any problem with confirming Duo's story to the Board, there was nothing to be afraid of when you told the truth. Zechs also stated he would be more than happy to stand witness to Relena's accusations and attacking of Duo in the hospital should the need arise.

Feeling a lot more confident, Duo hung up and with light steps went outside to the stables to find his boyfriend who had disappeared to saddle up Zero for Duo to work.

Two days later, Duo was sitting with Heero in the offices of Gordon and Klink, fidgeting nervously in the shirt and tie he was wearing. Heero seemed comfortable enough in his own shirt and tie, but then Heero often wore a shirt and tie, Duo didn't and it irritated his neck.

They were called through by the secretary and moved to sit in the large, leather chairs in Mr. Klink's office.

"Doctor Maxwell, Mr. Yuy, what can I do for you?"

Duo cleared his throat and then began to speak. He told the solicitor of Relena's attitude towards him, of her threats, the argument in the hospital and then the accusations to the Veterinary Board. Heero recited his dealings with the woman, her obsession with him, refusal to take no for an answer and what amounted to almost stalking of him. It wasn't easy for the pair to admit that they were gay and in a relationship together, but Mr. Klink didn't bat an eyelid. He sat and took notes, neither condemning nor condoning their relationship.

Once both men had finished their tale, Mr. Klink asked a few questions of his own, scribbled some more notes and then finally sat back and gazed at the two. "From the information you have both given me I can see two separate cases here," Mr. Klink began. "Firstly, Mr. Yuy: If what you say about this woman following you around, pushing herself onto you all the time even when you have told her you are not interested is true, you would have a good case to take her to court on a charge of stalking. Secondly; Doctor Maxwell: From the information you have given me I'd say you have a cut and dried case of suing this woman for defamation of character and false accusation. To prove that though, I will need a copy of the original complaint, as well as a copy of the investigation and the results of that investigation. It would also help to have statements from witnesses who can verify to this woman's fixation with Mr. Yuy and consequent dislike for you."

"I have spoken with the investigator that the Board sent out and expect to receive a copy of his findings somewhere in the next couple of days. As for a copy of the original complaint, I have asked for one but don't know yet if the Board will comply. If you wish to give them a call on my behalf and explain that I intend to seek damages from this woman, I'm sure they will release that
information to you." Duo looked a lot happier now than when he'd first walked into the office.

"That sounds fine to me, Doctor Maxwell. I'll contact the Board and get that information. Meanwhile, when you do receive your copy of the findings could you please let me know? I'll require a copy myself if we are to proceed and take action."

"Mr. Klink, what do you think my chances are of winning this case?"

"Doctor Maxwell, I don't take on a case I don't think I will win. In your case I think you have excellent grounds on which to sue this woman and receive compensation. Regardless of what person's sexual orientation is, the courts do not take lightly to someone falsely accusing another person of drug misuse for their own malicious reasons and it seems clear to me that that's what has occurred in this case if what you're telling me is correct."

"It's correct all right," Duo growled. "I have witnesses who will give statements and stand up in court to testify on my behalf if the need arises."

"That's good, Doctor Maxwell. Now, Mr. Yuy, do you wish to file a complaint and take this woman to court for stalking?"

Heero thought for a moment and then declined. "No. I think I'll leave it for the moment. What I would prefer to do is go down to the local police station and get a restraining order against her. That should hopefully stop her from harassing me. If that doesn't work then yes, I'll lodge a complaint against her for stalking."

"Fine. Doctor Maxwell, if you could give me the contact details for the Australian Veterinary Board I'll see what I can do to get this ball rolling."

Duo wrote out the details for the AVB and handed them over. Mr. Klink asked a few more questions and made some more notes on the file. With everything done that could be done for the moment, Duo and Heero stood.

"Thanks Mr. Klink, you've been a great help," said Duo as he shook the solicitor's hand.

"My pleasure Doctor Maxwell. I'll be in touch as soon as I have further information."

Duo and Heero left the solicitor's office with light hearts. On the way home they called at the local police station where Heero filled out a restraining order form, citing his reasons for having Relena banned from coming within five hundred meters of him. They called at the courthouse to have the order verified and signed by a justice of the peace and then returned to the police station with the completed forms and left them with the constable. They were told that the order would be hand delivered to Relena as soon as they had chance to do it. Heero thanked them and the pair left.

Two days later Duo had a call from Mr. Klink to advise him that the Board had forwarded a copy of the original complaint as well as a copy of the investigation and results of said investigation. Duo also received a copy of the report from the Board in the day's mail. Mr. Klink informed Duo that after going through both reports and complaint he was even more certain that Duo had an excellent case and that a letter would be drafted up and sent to Relena advising her of the charges that were being brought against her. Mr. Klink would also speak with the courthouse and let Duo know of the date that would be set for the preliminary hearing of the case.

Duo thanked the solicitor for all his work so far and requested a copy of the letter that would be sent to Relena. Mr. Klink said Duo would be able to peruse the draft before it was sent and if he was happy with it then they would go ahead and send it.
Duo had the draft the next day and read eagerly through it. Heero also took a look and couldn't hold the smirk.

Duo called the solicitor's office and okayed the letter within an hour of getting the draft.

"Just wait until the pink parasite gets an eyeful of that," Duo crowed, letter draft still in his hand.

Heero laughed and shook his head. "I can't help but feel sorry for her in one way."

"Well, I think she deserves everything she gets. She's done nothing but run me down and try to take you away from me. I can't understand how she can be so thick, that she can't see you're not interested in her."

"I agree. I've told her often enough to leave me alone, that I'm not interested in her. You'd think after the hospital scene she would have got it and butted out."

"If seeing me kissing you and you returning that kiss wasn't enough to convince her that you're gay, then I don't know what is." Duo scratched his head and then began to snicker.

"What?" Heero quirked an eyebrow.

"I just had a thought, Heero."

"Uh oh."

"Maybe we should tape ourselves screwing like rabbits and send her a copy. If she was to witness first hand how much you enjoy a romp between the sheets with me it might do the trick."

"You wouldn't?!" Heero looked a little horrified at the suggestion.

"Nah, I'm just teasing you, Heero. I don't want anyone other than me to see what a great body you have. Although I do recall saying to Treize and Zechs at the hospital that the only way I could see Relena accepting that you're gay would be for her to walk in on us when we were making love."

Heero's face began to color.

"You know, I'd love to be a fly on the wall when the pink bitch gets that letter from Klink," Duo mused.

"I'm sure Dorothy will let Treize know what happens."

"Yeah. Gotta love the grape vine around here."

* * *

Dorothy watched her mistress' face carefully as Relena read the letter. The bad feeling she had intensified as she saw the color drain from Relena's cheeks and her hand begin to shake. "Miss Relena? Are you okay?"

Relena swallowed and dropped the letter to the desk top. She cradled her head in her hands for a moment and then raised her eyes to meet Dorothy's. "This can't be happening."

"What can't be happening? Relena? What's wrong?" Dorothy was becoming more concerned by the second.

Suddenly Relena's face changed and she began to laugh. "I don't believe it," she began, "I don't
believe he could seriously think he can do this to me."

"Who do what to you?" Dorothy was getting a little worried.

"That faggot of a vet. This letter states that one Doctor Maxwell intends to sue me for defamation of character and false accusation."

"Eh?"

"Here, read it for yourself." Relena picked up the letter and handed it to Dorothy who took it and began to scan the page.

"...On behalf of our client, Doctor Duo Maxwell, we have been instructed to file charges against you, Miss Relena Peacecraft, for false accusation and defamation of character. The charges relate to a recent complaint you lodged with the Australian Veterinary Board citing illicit use of drugs by Doctor Maxwell for personal reasons. The subsequent investigation by the Australian Veterinary Board failed to find anything to substantiate your claims and Doctor Maxwell has been cleared of any and all charges.

The result of your false accusations has caused our client to suffer disruption to his practice, loss of income and emotional stress. Therefore we will be seeking both damages and a public apology from yourself for the inconvenience caused to our client..."

Dorothy let go a breath she hadn't been aware she was holding as the main part of the letter sank in.

Doctor Maxwell intended to sue Relena for all the trouble she'd caused? The letter continued on to give a date for a court appearance and request for a response from Relena. Dorothy couldn't blame the vet for taking this course of action, if anything she agreed with him. What Relena had done was unforgivable.

"I think you should call your lawyer, Miss Relena."

"Oh, I intend to, Dorothy. I'll go to court and I'll fight that fairy vet; and I'll win too. I'll show him that he can't keep my Heero away from me. Heero's not gay, he wants me, not that faggot."

The sound of the doorbell interrupted Relena's little rant, Dorothy got up to answer it.

Opening the front door, Dorothy was confronted by two tall policemen. "Can I help you, officers?"

"Miss Relena Peacecraft?"

"No. I'm Dorothy, Miss Relena's housekeeper."

"Ah. Would it be possible to speak with Miss Peacecraft?"

"Certainly, officer. If you would follow me." Dorothy admitted the officers into the house and closed the door. Curious as to their presence, she led them down the hall and to the study.

"Who was it, Dorothy? Oh." Relena stopped talking when the police officers entered the study behind Dorothy.

"The officers would like to speak with you, Miss Relena."

"Okay."

"Would you like me to leave?"
"No, that's okay, Dorothy. I'd prefer it if you would stay." Relena wasn't sure what the officers were here for and if it was bad news she would need some support.

"Miss Relena Peacecraft?" the officer asked again as he stared at the woman on the other side of the desk.

"That's me, officer. What can I do for you?"

The officer stepped forwards and presented Relena with an official looking document. Relena took it and glanced at it, a frown forming on her face.

"I have been instructed by the court to present you with this restraining order. From this point on, until the order is withdrawn, you are not to be in contact with one Mr. Heero Yuy by mail, telephone or e-mail. You are also not permitted to be within five hundred meters of Mr. Yuy. Should you breech this restraining order then the court will take action and prosecute you accordingly. Do you understand?"

Relena nodded numbly.

"Thank you." The officers turned to leave, Dorothy showing them out before returning to her mistress.

Relena slumped in her chair, completely deflated. She couldn't understand why her Heero would take out such a thing against her. Stepping back into the study, Dorothy couldn't help but feel a little sorry for Relena. The woman's delusional world had just come crashing down around her ears. But Dorothy had tried to warn her.

"Are you still so sure that Heero isn't gay?"

Relena didn't answer.

~ * ~

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Author’s Note: All the legal stuff is based on my own basic knowledge of how the system works here in Australia. I apologize now for any errors.
Relena continued to stare numbly at the official paper in her hand. Her eyes scanned over the page, seeing the words but not absorbing them. She couldn't believe what the officers had just told her - Heero, her Heero had taken out a restraining order against her? Why would he want to do that? Surely he wanted to be with her and not that pansy vet?

Dorothy watched the various emotions flitting across her mistress' face and could sympathize with the woman to a point. She couldn't deny though that Relena had it coming. Taking pity on her boss, Dorothy walked over and stood behind Relena, gently she began to massage the slightly slumped shoulders. "Are you okay, Miss Relena?"

"I don't understand, Dorothy. Why would Heero do this?"

Dorothy sighed. "Relena, you know the answer to that without asking me."

"It must be the work of that faggot." Relena's face darkened.

"Pardon?"

"I'll bet that vet has put Heero up to this, persuaded him somehow to take out this restraining order against me. Heero wouldn't do this, he's always been polite and friendly to me."

"Relena?"

"Yes?"

"Think back to the hospital. You said yourself about seeing Doctor Maxwell and Mr. Yuy kissing. From what you told me, it doesn't appear that Mr. Yuy was exactly protesting at the time."

"How could he when he was obviously under the influence of the drugs they'd given him?"

"Relena, what makes you so sure that Heero isn't gay? Has he said that himself?"

The question took Relena by surprise and she paused to think for a moment before replying. "Heero doesn't fit the gay 'type'," she responded.

"Oh?" Dorothy quirked an eyebrow. "And what exactly is the gay 'type'?"

"You know, long hair, feminine features, that kind of thing," Relena said absently.

Dorothy snorted. "So straight guys are all the muscular, macho kind?"

"Exactly, Dorothy. Guys such as Heero and Treize, they're your straight guy, not flouncy like that Maxwell creature with his long hair and female looks. That's why I can't understand why my Heero has had this restraining order put out against me..." Relena thought for a moment.

Dorothy wasn't sure she was going to like or understand Relena's reasoning for this.

"There's no two ways about it, that vet must have forced Heero to do this. I'll bet he's used some sort of underhanded tactics that Heero couldn't refuse to make him take out this order. Maybe he's threatened Heero's horse."
Dorothy bit her tongue for a moment. "Relena, I think you should worry about the charges brought against you and not the restraining order. I'd be contacting my lawyer and asking for help. These charges are not to be taken lightly and if Doctor Maxwell has been found innocent of the allegations you accused him of, I'd say you could be in some serious trouble."

"I don't think I have anything to fear, Dorothy. It's pretty obvious to me that creature has managed to bribe the investigator or fiddled his records somehow. But you're right, I'll call the solicitor now." Relena reached across the desk and picked up the 'phone.

* * *

Dorothy assisted Relena up the steps to the reception area of Randall and Associates - Solicitors. The solicitor had booked Relena an appointment the day after her call and Relena had asked Dorothy to accompany her. Sitting Relena down in a chair as she was still wearing the cast on her foot, Dorothy approached the receptionist to announce their arrival for the appointment. Five minutes later, Relena was called into the office of Mr. Randall, Dorothy remained in the waiting room.

"Good morning, Miss Peacecraft," Mr. Randall greeted.

"Good Morning, Mr. Randall," Relena replied and took the offered seat.

"Now, what can I do for you, Miss Peacecraft? You said something on the 'phone about a letter you'd received and charges being filed against you?"

Relena reached into her bag and withdrew the solicitor's letter and handed it over. "That's what I got in the mail yesterday. I intend to fight this, Mr. Randall. Read through it and then I'll explain my side of the story to you."

Randall took the offered letter and began to peruse it. As he read so the small furrow between his brows began to deepen. Clearly these were serious charges and from the look of the woman before him, she really didn't understand just how serious. Finished with his perusal, Randall lowered the paper to his desk and fixed his gaze on the woman before him. "I've read the letter; now, would you care to tell me what this is all about and your side of the story?"

"Certainly, Mr. Randall..."

It took Relena a good half an hour to tell her tale. Mr. Randall listened intently, taking notes from time to time and asking for clarification where needed. By the time the woman had finished, Randall was even more convinced this was going to be a case he couldn't win.

"Miss Peacecraft, let me get this straight. You say that a Mr. Yuy is your boyfriend and that he lives with a vet, Doctor Maxwell?"

"Yes."

"This vet, Doctor Maxwell, is a homosexual?"

"Yes."

"And Mr. Yuy is not?"

"Correct."

"You're saying that the vet, Doctor Maxwell, is forcing himself onto Mr. Yuy and that Mr. Yuy cannot prevent this from happening?"
"Yes."

"You believe that Doctor Maxwell is administering drugs of some sort to make Mr. Yuy receptive to Doctor Maxwell's advances and as such you have notified the Australian Veterinary Board of this breech of practice?"

"That's right, Mr. Randall. There's no way that my Heero would be with that fairy."

"Miss Peacecraft, may I remind you that being a homosexual is not against the law."

"It should be."

Mr. Randall sighed. "This letter from Doctor Maxwell's solicitors states that the Australian Veterinary Board has completed a thorough investigation into Doctor Maxwell's practice and records and that they can find nothing to substantiate your claim."

"He must have fiddled his records then."

"The Veterinary Board does not take accusations such as yours lightly, Miss Peacecraft. Rest assured, they would have done a thorough investigation."

"I don't care. They must have missed something. Mr. Randall, I do not intend to make a public apology and I certainly refuse to pay for any damages. This is all a farce and have engaged your services to defend me and prove these people wrong. Now, are you going to just sit there or are you going to take this case and make that pansy vet regret ever putting his dirty hands on my Heero?"

Randall knew he was fighting a losing battle here, not just with the client but the case as well. Still, there were a few things he could do and if the worst came to the worst maybe he could get an out of court settlement. "Okay, Miss Peacecraft, I'll draft a letter up and send it to Doctor Maxwell's solicitors informing them that we intend to fight this."

"Thank you."

"I'll need some further information from you though before I can proceed."

"Certainly."

"I'll need to contact the AVB and get a copy of their findings. I'll also need a complete statement from you regarding the argument you had with Doctor Maxwell at the hospital..."

By the time Relena stepped out of the office, Dorothy was dozing in her seat.

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Heero picked up the 'phone after the second ring. "Hello."

"May I speak with Doctor Maxwell, please?"

"I'm sorry, Doctor Maxwell isn't available right now. Can I take a message?"

"Please. This is Mr. Klink here. Could you ask him to call me as soon as he can?"

"Mr. Klink, it's Heero Yuy speaking. Can I possibly help?"

Five minutes later, Heero hung up the 'phone, his mind a turmoil of thoughts. He looked at the clock. Duo was out on a call and Heero didn't know how long he would be. Deciding against paging or
calling Duo's cell, Heero pushed the intercom between the house and the surgery.

"Catherine here."

"Catherine, it's Heero. Have you any idea when Duo will be back?"

"I'm not too sure but it shouldn't be too much longer. Is there something wrong? I can page him if you like?"

"No, nothing's wrong and there's no need to page him. When he gets back can you ask him to come straight to the house, please? I've got some news for him."

"I will, Heero."

"Thanks." Heero switched the intercom off and wandered through to the kitchen to get a glass of orange juice and ponder what Klink had told him.

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"I'll call back in ten days to remove the stitches, Miss Cartwright. Meanwhile, try to keep her confined as much as possible. The less stress and strain put on the stitches the better."

"Thank you, Doctor Maxwell." Miss Cartwright unclipped the lead rope and let the filly go. Once both she and the vet had stepped out of the stable, she closed and bolted the door. "Would you care to come into the house and wash your hands?"

"Thanks, that would be appreciated." Duo looked at the traces of blood still on his hands from stitching the wound to the filly's leg. He placed his instruments back into the car and removed a bottle of Penicillin, some syringes and needles. "I've given her a shot of antibiotic but you will need to repeat the injection daily for the next ten days. Ten milliliters per dose and it's muscular so you will need to inject it into the rump. Alternate the sides so she doesn't get sore." Duo handed over the antibiotic and necessary equipment.

"Thanks. I take it I should keep this in the 'fridge?"

"Yes."

Arriving at the house, Miss Cartwright led Duo to the bathroom where he could wash his hands. Exiting a moment later, Duo prepared to take his leave.

"You'll send me out the bill?"

"Yes. It will be at the end of the month," replied Duo.

"Thank you." The young woman seemed to hesitate for a moment and then spoke again. "Doctor Maxwell?"

"Yes?"

"I know this is none of my business and you can tell me to shove off, but... I heard that you and that Mr. Yuy, the one that's got the horses are, well, together."

"Ah." Duo felt the weight on his shoulders increase. Looked like this was going to be another client he would lose.

Seeing the reaction on the vet's face to her words, Miss Cartwright was quick to continue. "I just
want you to know that I think it's sweet and I wish you both all the best."

"Eh?" You could have knocked Duo over with a feather.

"Although I'll admit that I'm not all that happy."

"Pardon?" Duo didn't quite follow.

"You do realize what a waste this is? All the really nice, hot guys are either taken or gay. It's not fair you know. What's all us poor, single females to do now?"

Duo stared at the woman in stunned silence, Miss Cartwright began to laugh.

"I'm having a little fun with you," she giggled. "Seriously, I admire you both for your courage. It's not easy to admit to such a thing given society today. I hope you both find happiness together and wish Mr. Yuy all the best for his try outs for the cup team."

"Thank you, I'll pass on your best wishes." Duo had forgotten just how tight knit the horse world could be. The grape vine must have been working overtime lately.

"Don't worry, you won't be losing my business, or many of the others in the horse community. You're an excellent vet, Doctor Maxwell. I'll see you again in ten days to remove the stitches."

Duo found himself walking back to his car, head shaking in amusement. It would seem he had more allies than he'd thought.

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Arriving back at the surgery, Duo went in to the reception area and gave Catherine all the details on the case so she could log them into the computer. Once that was done, Catherine informed him that Heero wanted him to go directly to the house as he had some news for the vet. Mind churning over what the news could possibly be, Duo headed for the house and his lover.

Hearing the back door open, Heero knew his partner had returned and headed out to the kitchen to greet him. Seeing Heero coming through from the lounge room, Duo moved across the kitchen and met his lover half way.

"Catherine said you have some news for me," Duo began only to be cut off by a kiss from his boyfriend. "Mmmm, that was nice," he said as he wrapped his arms around Heero.

"The solicitor called."

"Ah." Duo released Heero from the embrace and took a step back trying to see from Heero's expression if the call had brought good or bad news. Heero's face was neutral though. "What did he say?"

"He didn't tell me much over the 'phone, just the basics. He wants you to call him and he'll give you all the information. What he did say was he'd received a letter from Relena's solicitor stating that she intends to fight the charges."

"Surely she realizes she doesn't stand a chance?"

"I don't know, Duo. That's all Klink would tell me. I think you'd better call him yourself and get all the information."

"Thanks, Heero. I'll call him now." Duo went through to the lounge room and the 'phone, Heero put
the kettle on to boil thinking they would both probably need a caffeine hit after the call. Maybe a scotch would be better, but as Duo was on duty and rarely drank, Heero not being much of a drinker either, plus the fact that they didn't have any scotch or anything alcoholic for that matter in the house anyway put paid to that idea so caffeine it would have to be.

Coffees made, Heero sat at the kitchen table waiting for Duo to return and fill him in. He didn't have to wait too long. Duo returned to the kitchen, his face dark and unreadable. Heero looked up and decided it was probably best to wait a few minutes and let the vet get some caffeine into his system before asking any questions.

Duo sat down at the kitchen table and accepted the mug of coffee that was silently pushed in front of him. He picked it up and took sip, then another. After a couple of minutes he felt a little better and turned his violet eyes to his lover. "Klink had a letter from the pink bitch's solicitor. She intends to fight me on this."

Heero nodded. He already knew that much.

"Just how delusional is she? Surely she must realize that she doesn't stand a chance in hell of winning? I've had enough of being the 'Mr. Nice Guy'. She can rot in hell for all I care, I'm going to sue her ass for everything I possibly can," Duo growled.

"Ah."

"Even when faced with the evidence in black and white she still doesn't get it. I swear she must have been at the end of the line when the brains were handed out."

"She's simply blinded by her obsession with me," Heero stated softly. "Duo, I'm sorry for all the trouble this has caused you."

"Heero, don't you dare take the blame for this. This is not your fault. Look, she's not just hurt me with her obsession, but she's hurt you, Treize and Taurus as well."

Hearing Taurus' name mentioned caused Heero to flinch and he lowered his eyes.

"No, Heero. This isn't natural. If it hadn't been you it would be some other poor bugger going through this. Heaven knows if she hasn't pulled this stunt before. Well, this time she's not going to win. Kink said there's a preliminary hearing set for next week. Klink will present our side of the case to the court and then the parasite's solicitor will have his chance to defend the charges."

"Then what?"

"Then it depends on what the judge thinks. Klink seems pretty sure it will be adjourned and a date set for a full hearing. When that happens we will be needed in court."

"I see."

Duo finished his coffee and closed his eyes for a moment. Heero could see the fine lines etched into the handsome face, lines that hadn't been there before and his heart broke for his lover. He just wished there was more he could do.

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Klink shuffled the papers in front of him and began his closing statement. "Your honor. The charge brought against Doctor Maxwell was fully investigated by the Australian Veterinary Board and Doctor Maxwell found innocent of any malpractice. As a consequence of this allegation, my client,
Doctor Duo Maxwell, has had his reputation put on the line, his name dragged through the mud and his code of ethics questioned. He has suffered loss of income as well as emotional stress. We therefore seek to claim damages for such loss to the amount of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars and a public apology from Miss Relena Peacecraft. Thank you, your honor." Klink bowed and resumed his seat.

The judge nodded and then turned to Mr. Randall. "Are you ready to state your case on behalf of the defendant?"

Randall stood and raised his eyes to meet those of the judge. "Yes, your honor, I am."

"Then proceed."

Randall was brief in his outlining of his client's defense, simply stating that Relena intended to fight the charge as she believed that Doctor Maxwell, by his own admittance to being a homosexual, is responsible for his loss of income.

Having heard both statements the judge took a few minutes to look over the case and make his decision. Clearing his throat, he spoke in a clear tone. "Gentlemen, in the case of Maxwell versus Peacecraft and the outline of the prosecution and defense, I hereby decree that this case is to go to a further court hearing where both parties will have the opportunity to present, with evidence, their case. The date for the hearing will be set by the bailiff. This hearing is now closed." The judge brought the gavel down with a bang and both solicitors offered their thanks before collecting their papers and exiting.

Once outside the court room, Klink turned to face his opponent. "I don't believe your client intends to defend this, Randall. Surely you know she doesn't stand a chance in hell of winning?"

Randall sighed. "I know that and you know that, but try telling my client that. For some reason she's adamant that she's not the one in the wrong here. I've tried to talk to her but she insists I represent her. I really don't have much choice."

"Well, all I can say is good luck to you. This case is cut and dried, all the evidence is in my client's favor and after hearing his story I can't say I blame him for suing your client. She must be a pretty thick individual not to see what she's done."

"Maybe I should enter a plea of insanity?"

Klink chuckled. "Might be your best bet," he replied and then offered his hand. Randall took it and shook it firmly. "Better go see the bailiff and get a court date then, I'd say you're going to need all the time you can get to prepare your defense, not that it's going to make any difference."

Shaking his head, Randall followed his colleague to the bailiff’s office.

With a court date set for two weeks time the solicitors left and went back to their respective offices to begin preparation of their respective cases and notify their clients of the court date.

* * *

Peacemillion grunted softly and pulled another mouthful of hay from his haynet. Chewing it he shifted his weight from one hind leg to the other. A small spasm of pain passed through his intestine and the horse grunted again.

Up at the house, Relena was feeling a little excited. Today she was heading back to the hospital and out patients section to have the plaster cast removed from her foot. It had been six weeks since the
cumbersome cast had gone on and she was more than ready to have it removed. Running the brush through her shining hair one last time, she deemed herself ready.

"All set?" asked Dorothy as she entered her mistress' bedroom.

"I certainly am. I can't wait to get this cast off and be able to walk normally again," replied Relena.

"Come on then, I've brought the car around to the front so we can go as soon as you've finished your hair." Dorothy assisted Relena to the car and once the woman was inside, she placed the crutches in the back and got in behind the wheel. "One plaster cast removal coming up," Dorothy quipped as she started the car and began the drive to the hospital.

Back in the stable block the young stable hand finished cleaning the last of the stables and began the task of refilling the haynets for those horses currently stabled. With the haynets done he topped up the water buckets and went to get himself some lunch. He didn't notice the light sweat beginning to break out on Peacemillion's coat or the subtle shifting of weight from one hind leg to the other.

Despite the light pain in his gut, Peacemillion continued to pull at the haynet, chewing and swallowing, oblivious to the fact that he was adding to his discomfort. The pain began to increase, steadily building until the stallion could ignore it no longer. He groaned softly and turned his head to look at his belly. Another spasm of pain and he kicked out in an effort to stop whatever it was that was hurting him.

* * *

"Keep the bandage on for two or three days to support the foot and then all should be fine and you can leave it off permanently. Don't put any undue stress or strain on the foot as the area is still a little weak and will take time to build up again." The doctor finished with his instructions and smiled at his patient. "Any questions?"

"No, doctor. Thank you for help."

"My pleasure, Miss Peacecraft." The doctor escorted Relena out of the room and back to the waiting room where Dorothy met them.

"All finished?" Dorothy inquired.

"Yes," Relena beamed back as she walked over to her housekeeper. "Come on, Dorothy. I think this calls for a celebration. Let's go grab some lunch and do some shopping."

Dorothy didn't argue.

* * *

The pain increased further and Peacemillion moved restlessly around his stable. He began to kick against his belly and grunted as the spasm intensified. He dropped his muzzle to the water bucket and lipped at the water. Another spasm hit his system and he groaned. Shifting again, he began to paw at the sawdust bedding and then lowered himself to his knees and finally lay down. As the spasms continued to build, Peacemillion tried to roll to relieve himself of some of the pain.

It didn't help any.

Sweat was now running freely from his skin and soaking his gray coat. Rolling around, the sawdust kicked up and covered his coat, matting into his mane and tail.
Walker returned from the local feed merchants where he'd gone to pay last month's account and order more feed and immediately headed for the stables to check on the horses before going to grab some lunch. Entering the stable area he sensed something wasn't right and frowned. He glanced around; all seemed to be in order but he couldn't help the nagging feeling. One by one he began to check the horses currently stabled.

Nearing the end of the one set of stables he heard the sounds of a horse grunting and thrashing around. He began to run in the direction of the noise. Stopping outside the stable of Peacemillion, Walker looked inside and felt his mouth go dry.

The stallion was rolling around the stable floor, obviously in a lot of pain. His gray coat was thick with sweat, dirt and dust, his eyes wide with fear and his nostrils deep red as he snorted in pain.

"Oh my god!" Walker turned and sprinted for the tack room, screaming for the stable hand as he ran.

The young lad stuck his head out of the small room the grooms used to take their lunch in to see what the commotion was. Spotting his boss and noting the agitated look he knew something was seriously wrong. "Boss?"

"Tommy, Peacemillion. He's got colic bad and is thrashing around in the stable. Go get him up and start walking him around. I'm calling for the vet now."

Tommy swallowed hard and nodded, taking off at a run he headed straight for the stallion's stable.

Walker grabbed the phone in the small office and quickly punched in the number for the Oakford Equine Hospital. It rang twice before being answered.

"Oakford Equine Hospital. How can I help you?"

"It's Walker here from the Peacecraft stud. I have a stallion down with colic and it's pretty bad. I need a vet immediately."

"One moment, Mr. Walker." The call was put on hold.

"Come on, come on," muttered Walker. Time was of the essence here.

"Mr. Walker?"

"Yes?"

"I have Doctor Merquise on the line."

"Thank you."

"Walker? I understand you have a horse with colic?" Zechs' voice came calmly down the line.

"Yes, yes, I do and he's in a very bad way. I need you to come out immediately."

Zechs asked a couple more questions before giving Walker instructions on what to do for the stallion until he could get there. Hanging up the phone, Zechs went through to the small dispensary and fetched the drugs he thought he would need. Letting the receptionist know where he was headed, Zechs left.

Walker went back out to where young Tommy was struggling with Peacemillion. The stallion didn't want to get up, he wanted to stay lying down and rolling. Tommy dodged the flailing hooves and rolling horse, managing to clip the lead rope to the halter and tried tugging hard to encourage the
horse to stand.

Walker joined in and between the two of them they managed to get the reluctant gray to his feet where he stood and swayed for a moment.

"Let's get him moving," said Walker. "Vet's on his way. We need to keep him upright and not let him roll again. He could twist a gut if he does and then there isn't much hope for him. Miss Peacecraft will have my hide if anything happens to this horse."

Tommy nodded and did his best to encourage the stallion to walk. Between the two of them, Tommy pulling on the halter and Walker pushing, shoving and supporting the gray from the side, they managed to get the stallion to walk.

Zechs pulled into the stable yard fifteen minutes after the call. He could see the two men and the horse staggering around the yard. Jumping out of the car, Zechs grabbed what he would need and strode quickly across to the group. The nearer he got, the deeper the feeling of dread in his stomach.

Walker was relieved to see the vet arrive and did his best to smile at the tall blonde.

"How long has he been like this?" Zechs asked as he quickly took the horse's heart and breathing rate.

"I'm not sure. I came back from the feed store and found him rolling in the stable. That was about twenty-five minutes ago."

"He was fine when I went in for my lunch about forty-five minutes ago," piped up Tommy as he struggled to keep the stallion on his feet.

Zechs took the animal's temperature and the frown increased. He didn't like this, didn't like it at all. Quickly he looked at the gums and inside eyelid of the horse and felt his heart plummet further. Normally they were a salmon pink color.

Peacemillion's were deep red.

Running the stethoscope over the horse's belly, Zechs listened carefully for the sounds that signified Peacemillion's internal workings.

All was silent.

The sense of dread mounted in his gut. Zechs had a strong feeling that the horse had twisted a bowel; and if that was the case, the outlook wasn't all that good. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Zechs turned to the groom.

"I can't hear anything coming from inside. His temperature, heart and breathing rates are up, also his color isn't good. He definitely has colic, but..." This was the part Zechs was finding to be the most difficult. "I think it may be a little more serious."

Walker closed his eyes momentarily and then turned to the vet as he continued, "I think he may have already twisted a bowel."

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tbc...
Chapter 34

"I think he may have twisted a bowel."

The words struck Walker like a thunderbolt and the groom closed his eyes for a moment. His heart plummeted and he swallowed hard before managing to find his voice and speak. "Can you help him?"

That was the million dollar question.

"I will certainly do all I can in my power to help him," replied Zechs. "Firstly I'll give him a shot to alleviate the pain, then I want to drench him. There's always the chance that he hasn't twisted a bowel yet and if that's the case then the oil should shift the blockage." Without waiting for Walker to reply, Zechs headed back to his car and fetched the items he would need. Returning, he looked around. "You don't have a crush, do you?"

"No, we don't."

"Okay, I guess we will have to hope he doesn't get too upset with the drenching then." A crush was a vet's best friend when it came to treating large animals. It prevented the animal from hurting either itself or the people treating it. Zechs didn't have time though to wish for one, this horse needed treating and now. Swabbing an area on the gray's sweating neck, Zechs injected a muscle relaxant and pain killer. Capping the needle he placed it into the sharps container he carried in the car. While he waited for the injections to take effect, Zechs poured the paraffin oil into the bucket he'd brought with him and dropped the clear, plastic hose in as well. Finished with his preparations, Zechs turned to the groom. "Let's see if we can get him over there by the wall, that way we will have a bit of support both for him and for us."

Between the three of them they were able to persuade the swaying horse to walk the few steps to the wall. Peacemillion gave another groan and tried to go down and roll again, Walker only just managing to stop him. Zechs knew things were getting crucial and he needed to get the oil into the horse's insides as quickly as possible if he was to have any chance of saving the horse.

Approaching the stallion with the bucket and oil, Zechs removed the plastic tube and grasped the horse's muzzle firmly. The drugs had begun to work and the stallion submitted to the vet's actions. Carefully Zechs began to pass the tube into the gray's nostril, easing it along the delicate lining until he came upon the resistance of the horse's epiglottis. Feeling carefully at Peacemillion's throat, Zechs coaxed the tube further forward, fiddling slightly until Peacemillion swallowed and he was able to push the tube through the epiglottis and down the gullet to the stallion's stomach. Once he deemed the tube to be in place, Zechs took the remaining tube, found the end and blew softly into it to determine if it was in the horse's stomach and not the lungs. He listened carefully to the gurgling sound that came back, confirming the tube was definitely in the stomach.

"Hold him steady," Zechs said as he reached for the small hand pump in the bucket and attached the hose to it. With the apparatus now in place, Zechs began the task of pumping the oil through the tube and into the horse's stomach. Once the bucket was empty Zechs began to pull the tube from the gray's nostril, being careful not to damage the fragile inner lining. Tube removed, Zechs turned to the groom. "Now all we can do is walk him around and wait."

Grimly, Walker nodded and assisted Tommy with getting the animal to move.
Morning consults had finished and Heero gave a sigh of relief as he closed the door and locked it. It was Catherine's day off and he was playing the role of receptionist. Absently he scratched at the plaster cast on his right arm, the skin was itchy but unfortunately he couldn't get to it properly to ease the itch. He would be glad when the damn thing was removed. He consoled himself with the thought that it would only be another three weeks and he would be rid of the cumbersome thing. Wandring back into the reception area he quickly finished off the last of the client files and switched the computer to stand-by mode. Luckily he could still work with one hand on the keyboard, Catherine, Hilde or Duo doing any of the writing side that needed to be done.

He was looking forward to some lunch with his lover and then working with Zero in the afternoon. Treize was calling over to jump the gray and Heero was pleased with the way the stallion was performing. With Duo's exercising Zero on the flat and then Treize jumping him twice a week, the horse was holding good muscle tone and keeping his form. Duo didn't have anything booked in for surgery so barring any emergency or call outs, the afternoon was theirs to spend as they wished.

Once Zero had been worked, Heero was hoping to enjoy a little quality time with his boyfriend.

He'd missed the intimate contact with Duo. Not only did his broken arm cause minor problems, but this case with Relena didn't help much in the libido stakes either. Heero wanted to change that. He was drawn from his musings when a soft kiss was planted on his cheek and he turned his head to see the long haired vet smiling softly at him.

"I hope they're happy thoughts you're having."

"How could they be anything else when it's you I'm thinking about?" Heero replied.

Duo's smile widened and he swooped in for another kiss; this time taking Heero's lips. "All done here?"

"Yeah. There's a couple of things that need your signature on them but other than that everything is loaded onto Nrobbuts' database."

"Thanks. I'll sign the paperwork later. I've finished cleaning up," said Duo as he removed his white coat and hung it on the back of the door. "Hungry?" Duo asked.

"Starving."

"Then let's go grab some lunch."

The pair departed for the house and food.

Zechs looked at his watch again. Ten minutes had passed since he'd drenched Peacemillion with the oil and so far nothing had happened. The feeling of unease continued to build in Zechs and he reached for his stethoscope again. He checked the stallion's heart and breathing rates again. Temperature was taken and then Zechs listened to the gray's insides once more. Nothing had changed.

The heart and breathing rates were still accelerated but not gotten any worse due to the drugs Zechs had administered. The temperature had risen a touch but the gray's insides were still silent. Zechs didn't like it one bit. "I'm going to give him another couple of liters of oil," he told Walker. Zechs didn't think the oil would make much difference and he decided that after this dose, if the horse
hadn't started to make some internal sounds or passed any manure he would have to conclude that the gut was twisted.

The tube was passed down into the horse's stomach and the oil administered. Peacemillion made no objection to anything the human's did to him, he was too locked up in his own misery to care. Tommy and Walker began to walk the horse again.

Zechs replaced the items in his car as he waited for any sign of improvement in the stallion. He didn't hold much hope and if the horse had twisted a gut then there were two options. Zechs forced them to the back of his mind and pushed the humane killer to the side of the box in the trunk of his car.

Fifteen minutes passed and still no sign that the oil was having any effect. Zechs did his checks and wasn't surprised when he didn't hear anything signaling that the digestive system had started to work coming from inside the stallion. He hadn't expected to. With a heavy sigh he turned to the groom and stable hand. "This isn't working. The oil should have had an effect by now but there's nothing. I'm pretty certain he has a twisted bowel."

Walker paled. "Is there anything else you can do for him? He's one of Miss Peacecraft's top sires."

"There's two choices here," began Zechs, "The first is to put him down, something I'd prefer not to do. The second is to operate, find the twist and rectify it."

"You can do that?"

"Yes, we can. Surgery on equines has advanced dramatically over the past few years. We have performed several operations to correct a twisted bowel. There are risks though."

"What are the risks?" Walker asked, latching onto the one glimmer of hope that remained.

"The biggest one is shock. As you know, horses don't take kindly to anesthesia and there is the risk of the animal going into shock and not coming out of it. Then there is the operation itself. It's a large operation and depending on the twist to the bowel, if the tissue has died, how much is affected, things like that can all affect the outcome. Then there is the cost as well. This sort of operation is not cheap."

"What is the success rate?"

"Currently we have a seventy-five percent survival rate; but that all depends on the internal damage. We could go in and operate, remove the twist and have the horse pull through okay only to lose him later to infection or shock."

"Given the alternative, I'd like you to operate, Doctor Merquise." Walker gently pulled the stallion's ears.

"I will need the consent of the owner before I can go ahead and operate."

"I'll call Miss Peacecraft now." Walker left to go make the call. He dialed the number of Relena's cell and waited.

"I'm sorry, the number you have called is either switched off or not in a receptive area. Please try again later."

"Shit!" Walker cursed as he heard the recorded message. He tried again only to get the same message. Now what to do? Walking back out to the vet, Walker pondered the situation and then gave a sigh of relief. He looked the vet in the eye and spoke. "I tried Miss Peacecraft's cell but she's
either got it turned off or there's no signal."

"Damn! We really need to get this horse to surgery, the longer we wait the slimmer his chances."

"I'll give you consent though." Walker anticipated what the vet was going to say and beat him to it. "I'm the head groom here and when Miss Peacecraft isn't available to make decisions regarding the horses then I have the authority to do so on her behalf."

"Are you sure?" Zechs asked. He didn't want to be nit picky but he couldn't just go carving into a valuable animal without consent. If the horse died and the owner hadn't signed consent then he could find himself in some serious trouble.

"I have it in my employment contract. Don't worry, Doctor Merquise, I'll sign the consent forms, you won't have a problem at all as I have the authority in black and white, signed by both Miss Peacecraft and myself. I know she would give consent if I was able to contact her."

"Okay then. Do you have a horse float?"

"Yes."

"Good. Go hitch it up and we can get the horse into it. I'll need to take him back to the hospital to operate."

Walker left to fetch his car and hitch up the float. While he was gone, Zechs called the surgery to let them know what was happening and to have someone prep the operating room for him.

"Oakford Equine Hospital. How may I help you?"

"Zoe, it's Zechs. Look, this colic case I was called out to, it looks like the horse has twisted a bowel. I'm going to need to operate. Can you organize to have the theater prepped and ready for me? I'll also need a couple of the nurses to help out and Doctor Alves to assist. I'll be transporting the patient shortly and will call with an ETA once I'm on the road."

"Damn! Doctor Merquise? I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"What?"

"The theater is already in use. Doctor Alves had an emergency as well. A horse staked itself through the throat and he's currently operating to repair the damage to the trachea, gullet and surrounding tissues. He won't be finished for at least another two hours yet."

"Fuck!" Zechs swore and rubbed his face. He didn't need this, not now.

"I can call Ascot Equine hospital and see if we can use their operating theater."

Zechs mentally recalled Ascot's practice and noted the distance they would have to travel. "No good. It's too far and the horse wouldn't make it."

"I don't know of anywhere else that's close that has an operating facility big enough for what you need, Doctor Merquise."

"Of course!" Zechs slapped his forehead.

"Doctor Merquise?"

"It's okay, Zoe. I think I know of a practice that could help out. Leave it with me and I'll see what I
can do."

"Okay. Good luck."

"Thanks." Zechs disconnected the call and quickly punched in another number.

"Maxwell Veterinary Hospital."

"Duo?"

"Zechs? Good to hear from you buddy. What's up?"

"Duo? I need your help..."

* * *

Duo and Heero had just finished their lunch, Duo stacking the dishes in the sink ready to wash up when the 'phone rang. Wiping his hands on the dishtowel, Duo went through to the lounge to answer it.

"Maxwell Veterinary Practice," he said as he sat on the sofa next to Heero, smiling softly as Heero's left arm wound around his waist. Hearing Zechs' voice on the other end, Duo quickly sat up.

"Zechs? Good to hear from you buddy. What's up?" Duo could sense there was something wrong simply from Zechs' voice. It held an edge to it.

Zechs began to explain his predicament to Duo. "I'm sure this horse has twisted a gut and if I don't operate soon he's going to die for sure. Problem is, our theater is currently in use for another emergency. The only other one is at Ascot and the horse won't last the distance. I remembered you have a large operating theater and I was hoping I could borrow it to perform the surgery."

"Of course you can, Zechs. It's not in use right now so bring the animal right over."

"Duo? Would you mind if I asked you to assist? Doctor Alves is operating back at Oakford and Doctor Sharpe is on vacation. I can't do this by myself, I need assistance."

"I'd be happy to assist you, Zechs. I'll go start prepping the theater now for you."

"There's one other thing, Duo."

"Oh?"

"This horse, it's one of Relena Peacecraft's. Her stallion, Peacemillion."

Duo was silent for a moment and then spoke. "Okay. Look, Zechs, I won't pretend here. I don't like that woman and I'd prefer to have nothing to do with her. However, that argument is between me and her, this isn't the horse's fault and I can't let an animal suffer if I can help it. How long until you get here?"

"About half an hour."

"Come straight to the stables, I'll have everything ready to go."

"Duo?"

"Yes?"
"Thank you. I owe you big time."

"Just remember I'm doing this for the horse, Zechs, not that pink maniac."

"I understand. I'll see you soon."

The line went dead and Duo slowly hung up the phone, deep in thought.

"What's going on?" Heero asked from the side. He'd gathered there was some sort of emergency.

"That was Zechs, he needs to use the theater to operate on a horse with a twisted bowel." Duo turned to face his lover. "The horse is Peacemillion."

"Fuck!"

"My sentiments exactly," replied Duo.

"Why can't he use Oakford's theater?"

Duo explained what Zechs had told him over the phone.

Heero shook his head and then his eyes widened. "I wonder what Relena thinks about this?"

"I don't give a rat's ass what she thinks, I'm only doing this for Zechs and the horse, not her. Speaking of which, I'd better get my butt down to the stables and prep the operating theater."

"I'll come and help. Well, as much help as I can be with this thing." Heero indicated the cast on his arm.

"Thanks." Duo gave his boyfriend a soft kiss. "Let's go, they will be here soon."

* * *

Walker, Tommy and Zechs managed to get Peacemillion into the float after a lot of shoving, pushing and grunting. Zechs gave the stallion another shot of painkiller and deemed them ready to go. He told Walker of the change of venue for the surgery and once he was sure the groom knew where to go, Zechs jumped into his own car and drove ahead to help Duo prepare for their patient.

Walker tried again to reach Relena and got the same message. He knew the woman had gone to the hospital to have the cast removed from her foot so he assumed she'd turned her phone off whilst in the hospital. What time she was due back though was anyone's guess. Right now Walker had more pressing issues to deal with; he'd try to contact his boss again once Peacemillion was being taken care of.

Duo fetched a fresh set of instruments from the dispensary and took them through to the operating theater. Heero looked up from where he was checking the rolls of cat gut, making sure there would be enough there for suturing. Duo set the instruments down and checked the cylinders to the side that held oxygen and anesthetic. They were mainly used as a back up, intravenous anesthetic being the method they tended to use on large animals. Satisfied that there was enough in the tanks should the need arise to use them, Duo began to set the operating table up ready for the horse, tilting it onto its side and swinging the overhead slings into place.

Being such a large animal one could not physically lift a horse onto an operating table and so a set of slings, along with the tilting table was the general method employed.

"All set?"
Duo turned to face Heero. "Almost. I need to fetch the drugs and that should be it." Duo went to step out of the theater, Heero right behind him.

"I think that's Zechs," said Heero as he listened to the sound of an approaching car. Stepping out of the stable block, Heero noted the vehicle coming down the driveway.

Zechs pulled up and jumped out of the car. "Hi, Heero. Sorry about all this."

"No problem, Zechs. Duo's inside, he's just finished setting everything up. You might want to check it all yourself though to make sure we have everything you'll need."

"Thanks. Walker shouldn't be too far behind me with the float and horse. I just hope we're not too late."

"I'll wait out here for them and call you when they arrive. You go get scrubbed up."

Zechs gave a warm smile and entered the stable block. He found Duo in the small dispensary scrubbing up. Duo was already dressed in his surgical greens.

"Hey, Zechs."

"Duo. I don't know how to thank you for this."

Duo gave a wave of his hand. "No thanks needed, Zechs."

"I know this must be awkward for you, Peacemillion being Relena's horse and with the circumstances what they are." Zechs didn't get the chance to say anything further, Duo cut him off.

"I'm doing this for the horse, Zechs, not for that woman. Now, I have a set of surgical scrubs over there if you want to use them. I don't know how they will go for fit though, I'm a bit smaller than you, although they were a couple of sizes too big for me if I remember correctly."

"Thanks." Zechs grabbed the scrubs and removed his jacket, shirt and pants, slipping into the scrubs and pulling the ties together. They were a little short in the leg, stopping just above Zechs' ankles while the top fitted fine.

"Everything's set in theater, I'd like you to double check though. Anything else you need, let me know."

Zechs nodded and went to check. All appeared to be as he needed and he again sent a silent prayer of thanks.

"Horse is here!" Heero yelled from outside and both Duo and Zechs went out to help get Peacemillion off the float and into the operating theater.

Out in the paddocks, Zero, Scythe and little Shini cocked their ears in interest at the approaching float. As the float pulled up, all three horses trotted over to their respective fences to get a look at the 'newcomer'. Zero let fly with a loud neigh as he scented another stallion, Shinigami added his own softer neigh to the mix while Scythe simply gave a few low wuffles.

Walker brought the float to a stop where Heero indicated and cut the car's engine. He was quickly out of the driver's seat and around to the back to release the tail gate. Heero was waiting for him and Walker gave the young rider a nod. He remembered Heero from when Treize had brought him out to the stud with him soon after Peacemillion had arrived from Europe.
"How are you, Heero?"

"I'm doing okay," replied Heero. "Sorry to hear about Peacemillion, but I'm sure that Zechs and Duo will be able to take care of him." As Heero finished speaking so Zechs and Duo appeared from inside the stable block.

"Walker, I'd like you to meet Doctor Duo Maxwell. He's kindly allowed me to use his operating facilities and offered to assist me."

Walker shook Duo's hand. "I can't thank you enough for this, Doctor Maxwell."

"My pleasure," replied Duo. "Now, let's get this horse off the float and inside, every minute counts here." Duo moved to the side to allow Walker and Zechs to lower the tail gate.

Walker disappeared inside to bring the horse out, Zechs was relieved to find the animal still standing. Out in the paddock, Zero was trotting up and down the fence line, his ears pricked and eyes firmly fixed on the float. He knew there was another stallion in there and while Zero didn't normally bother about other horses when out competing, this was different. This was his home turf and he had a mare here, as well as one of his offspring.

Heero watched his horse, a smile of amusement on his face. Duo turned to see where Heero's gaze was and smiled to himself when he saw the display Zero was putting on. The stallion had his tail kinked up over his back and was literally bouncing over the ground, his trot steps light and springy.

"Someone's showing off," Duo commented.

Heero chuckled. "He's just trying to impress the newcomer. It's all to do with staking a claim and marking your territory so to speak."

Duo shifted a little closer to Heero and ran his fingers along Heero's spine, pausing at his rear to give a gentle squeeze to those enticing buttocks. "I know how he feels."

Heero squirmed and gave a soft moan. "Looks like someone else wants to stake their claim too," he murmured.

Duo snickered and leaned over to capture Heero's lips in a chaste kiss. "I also intend to mark my territory later."

Heero moaned again. "You can mark me anytime, Duo."

They pulled apart as Peacemillion began to come down the ramp with unsteady steps and Duo went to one side of the horse while Zechs took the other to assist the animal and keep him straight. Once Peacemillion was off the float, Duo got his first good look at the state of the horse. His eyes narrowed and a frown etched his features. Heero was also stunned by the appearance of the horse. Gone was the proud stallion, replaced by this creature that hung its head, flanks heaving, dried sweat and dirt matting the coat and a dull look in the eyes.

"Shit, you weren't joking, Zechs, when you said he was in a bad way." Duo's experienced eyes roamed the body of the stallion. "Come on, we need to get him inside and start operating right away. He doesn't look like he has much time."

To Heero it looked as if the horse was already too far gone and his heart twisted. Despite his dislike of Relena, he would never wish this suffering upon an animal. Heero wasn't able to help much with getting the horse inside, he could only use the one arm and Duo gave him a look that clearly said 'don't you dare help, I don't want you getting hurt again'. Heero opted to make sure that the pathway
was clear.

Slowly Peacemillion managed to stagger into the operating theater where Duo immediately began to organize the slings and with Zechs' assistance, got them into place and around the horse's girth area and flanks.

"I'd like to give him a little of the anesthetic and once he starts to sway I can maneuver the table into position before giving him the rest," said Duo as he checked the horse's position in relation to the operating table.

With Walker standing at the stallion's head, Zechs fetched the anesthetic and swabbed a spot on Peacemillion's neck. He slipped the needle in and began to inject the anesthetic. Duo stood to the side, Heero with him ready to move the table.

Peacemillion's legs began to buckle slightly, the slings taking his weight so he didn't fall. Once they could see which way the horse was tending to lean, Duo and Heero maneuvered the operating table into position.

"Give him the rest now, Zechs. As he starts to go under, Heero will keep the table steady and in place, I'll operate the slings to bring him onto the table." Duo moved to the mechanism that operated the hydraulics for the slings.

With everyone in place, Zechs administered the rest of the anesthetic.

Peacemillion began to feel funny. His legs didn't want to take his weight anymore and his sight began to blur. He felt the constant pain easing a little and he grunted softly. He closed his eyes as the world of pain around him slipped away and he sank into unconsciousness.

The slings tightened as the horse began to go limp; Duo pushed the buttons and began to operate the little 'joy stick'. The slings lifted, raising the horse up as Heero maneuvered the operating table forward and slightly underneath the unconscious animal. Duo continued to move the joy stick, the slings obeying and within a minute the horse was lying on his side on the table, Heero quick to bring the table back into a horizontal position and at the right height for the two vets to be able to operate.

"Right. Let's get started," said Zechs. "Walker, there is no need for you to be in here, please wait outside."

Heero took Walker by the arm and led him to the operating room door. "Come on, I'll take you up to the house and make you a coffee. This is going to take a while and we will only be in the way."

Walker nodded numbly and unclipped the lead rope from the sleeping stallion's halter. "Please, do everything you can for him. Not because he's valuable, but because..." Walker swallowed the lump in his throat. "He's special."

Zechs gave the groom's arm a squeeze. "I understand. We will do all that we can. Go with Heero and try to relax. We will call you when it's all over."

Walker nodded and began to leave. Heero turned to Duo who was slipping on his latex gloves. He didn't need to say anything, the contact they made with their eyes said it all. Duo gave his lover a reassuring smile and then fixed his concentration firmly on the horse and the operation ahead.

* * *

Heero took Walker up to the house and made him a strong coffee. They sat opposite each other at the kitchen table, Walker brooding while Heero was unable to find the right words to comfort the groom.
After a few minutes silence with only the ticking of the clock to break it, Walker spoke.

"I hope they can help him."

Heero looked up at the softly spoken words. He knew the groom was upset and genuinely cared for the stallion. "If I know Duo he will do everything he possibly can to help him, Zechs too. Have faith in them, they're both very skilled vets and if anyone can save Peacemillion it will be those two."

"Thanks." Walker still looked miserable though, despite Heero's reassurance. "I guess I should try Miss Peacecraft again."

"She doesn't know?"

"No. I haven't been able to get in contact with her yet. I've tried calling her cell but it says it's either switched off or not in a receiving area."

"What about consent?"

"I have the authority to sign when Miss Peacecraft isn't available."

Heero had thought it a little odd that Relena hadn't shown up or had anything to say about Zechs bringing the horse here or that Duo was assisting. Now all the pieces fell into place. Silently Heero mused over what the woman would think once she knew.

"Damn! Still can't get her." Walker pocketed his cell.

"All you can do is keep on trying," Heero said.

"Yeah." Walker bore the look of defeat. The sounds of a car pulling up broke them from their thoughts and Heero stood up to see out the kitchen window who was visiting.

"Shit! Treize." With all the excitement going on, Heero had forgotten that Treize was coming over to jump Zero. Abandoning his coffee, Heero went outside to greet the man.

Treize got out of his car, a little surprised to see Zero still in the paddock. Usually Heero had him saddled up and Duo had been warming the stallion up for him. He turned as he heard the back door to the house open and Heero step out, a grim look on his face. Treize knew immediately that something wasn't right. "Heero?"

"Treize. I'm afraid there's been a slight change of plan." Heero explained to Treize what was going on, Treize's face paling as he took in the information. He followed Hero to the house where Walker was still sitting in the kitchen and sat down.

"What exactly happened?" Treize asked the groom.

Walker gave them all the details, Heero reiterating the bit where Zechs had arrived and that the two vets were now in theater operating to save Peacemillion's life. Treize leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his bangs.

"You haven't been able to get Relena?"

"No. She went to the hospital this morning to have her cast removed. I'd say she's turned her cell off while in the hospital and hasn't turned it back on again. I've no idea when she's planning on coming back either."

Treize thought for a moment. "If I know Relena, she's probably gone shopping after her hospital
appointment. Look, you keep trying her on the cell, I'm going to drive into Salsbury and see if I can find her. She needs to know about this and as soon as possible."

"I agree," replied Walker.

Treize stood up. "I'll get going now. I'll call you as soon as I find her. In the meantime, keep trying to get her and if you do, call me and let me know."

"Will do," replied Walker.

Heero escorted Treize back out to his car. "Thanks, Treize. As much as I dislike Relena for all the shit she's caused Duo, I wouldn't wish this upon her."

"I know, Heero. I think Duo's an amazing person, to be doing what he is after all the crap she's caused; he's one special person."

"He is," replied Heero softly.

"I'll call you as soon as I find her." Treize got into his car and sped off. Heero watched him go, hoping that one way or the other they would be able to get Relena and let her know what was happening to her horse.

Walking back to the house, Heero glanced towards the stable block and operating theater within. Yes, Duo certainly was an amazing person, but Heero already knew that.

~ * ~

tbc....
Chapter 35

Treize sped towards the township of Salsbury, his mind going a mile a minute as he tried to think where Relena would have gone after her visit to the hospital. Her foot would most likely be sore still so he didn't think she would have gone too far. He guessed she had probably gone shopping which didn't help all that much as there were a multitude of shops located in the Salsbury township.

Treize passed by the hospital, mentally recalling what shops were around that area and beginning to cruise the various streets. Trying to keep one eye on the traffic and another on scanning the sidewalks and shop fronts, Treize knew he was facing an impossible task.

It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

But he had to try.

He turned down yet another street and continued his search.

* * *

With Peacemillion now stretched out on his side on the operating table, Duo secured the horse's hind legs together before moving to the front limbs and repeating the process. Zechs was busy checking the heart and breathing rates, hooking up Duo's monitor and securing the small electrodes to the horse's chest. Duo fitted the oxygen mask over the horse's muzzle and checked the feed of the gas. Given the state the stallion was in when he arrived at the surgery, Duo thought it wouldn't hurt to have that added oxygen while operating.

"All set?" Duo asked as he picked up the clippers.

"Yeah."

Duo began to clip away the hair from a large section on Peacemillion's flank, Zechs swept the hair up and disposed of it into the trash can. Once the area was clipped clean of hair, Duo fetched the betadine and began to swab the skin, thoroughly soaking it in readiness for the operation. With everything now set to go, Duo pulled the tray with the instruments closer to them and with one final check of the horse's vitals, he pulled his surgical mask up, donned a fresh pair of gloves and looked at Zechs.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Zechs looked from Duo to the smooth, exposed flank of the horse before him. "Here goes nothing," he muttered to himself. "Scalpel."

Duo placed the scalpel in Zechs' hand and stood back to watch. Zechs took the sharp instrument, poised his hand above the flank for a moment and then made a swift incision.

* * *

Walker shut the cell phone again, a snort of frustration passing his lips. "Still can't get the woman. Why the hell bother to have a cell phone if no-one can call you?" he grumbled.

"That's women for you," replied Heero.

Walker rolled his eyes. "My missus is the same. Turns her damn cell off and then goes all hissy on
me because I didn't call her to let her know I'd be late for dinner or something. Beats me why they have them if they don't answer them or keep them switched on."

"I hope Treize is having more luck," said Heero as he glanced at the clock. Treize had been gone almost an hour and no word as yet. Duo and Zechs had been operating for at least an hour after you discounted prep time. Heero wondered how it was all going. Walker echoed his thoughts.

"I wonder how they're getting on..." Walker shifted slightly in his seat.

"They must be doing okay so far," replied Heero. "Like they say, no news is good news."

"I hope so. That horse..."

"I know, Walker. It's not just their value. They're more than dollar signs, they're friends."

"Yeah. They do kinda have a habit of getting under your skin."

Heero knew exactly what the groom meant. He couldn't imagine life without Zero; or Scythe or Shini for that matter. You tended to develop a bond with the animal, something that couldn't be explained and when they hurt, you hurt.

Glancing at the clock again, Heero noted that Hilde would be coming in soon for the evening consults. He was supposed to be taking care of the reception area as it was Catherine's day off. He wondered how many clients they had booked in and if Hilde would be able to handle it all herself if he were to remain here with Walker and be ready to assist Duo and Zechs if they needed him?

"Walker?"

"Yes?"

"I have to go up to the surgery for a few minutes. Hilde, the other vet, is due in for evening consults shortly and I'm supposed to be handling the reception area."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Heero. I'm stopping you from doing your work. I can go back down to the stables and wait there, I don't want to keep you from your work."

"That's okay, Walker. I'm not about to leave you alone. You need company. I was going to see if Hilde can handle the clients and reception by herself. I don't know how many we have booked in for this evening but it shouldn't cause any problems."

"Are you sure?" While Walker was quite prepared to wait by himself the thought of having company was much more appealing.

"I'm sure. Would you like to come up to the surgery as well or would you rather wait here?"

"I'll come with you, if you don't mind."

"Come on then." Heero stood up and led the way from the house to the small building that housed the practice.

* * *

"Any idea exactly where the twist is?" Duo asked as he looked at the pile of intestines welling up from inside the incision Zechs had made.

"No. Not a clue."
"In my experience the blockage and resulting twist is usually in the small intestine. I'd suggest we try starting at the stomach and working our way back."

"I've found the same thing," replied Zechs. "Most of the ones I've come across have been in the small intestine too. Geeze, why do they have to have such a large digestive tract?" he added as several pink loops tried to tangle him up.

Duo chuckled. "I think I'd better get a couple of large bowls, we're gonna need something to put this lot in as we search through it and I don't particularly fancy having the patient's guts spilling out over the floor."

Zechs agreed and checked the monitors while Duo fetched two large, stainless steel bowls and placed them close at hand. Once more they began the task of searching through Peacemillion's innards for the twist.

"I can feel something hard down here," said Duo as he fished around inside the stallion's belly.

"Can you bring it up a bit?"

"Hang on." Duo reached deeper into the abdominal cavity and gingerly drew the slippery intestine out. "There," he said as he lay the loop on a green surgical cloth on the horse's flank.

Zechs immediately began to inspect the section of intestine. "I'd say that's it all right. That has to be the blockage." Gently Zechs felt around the hardened mass. "Feels like a great wad of grass and mud."

"Wouldn't surprise me. The way the new grass is coming through at the moment, a lot of horses are taking in the sand and roots as they try to graze on the stuff," replied Duo as he studied the mass.

It was a known fact that the new grass, when it made its appearance was likely to cause colic in horses as its root system wasn't well established and when the horse went to bite the blades off, the plant tended to just pull out of the ground.

"I'd say this is where the bowel was twisted," Zechs stated as he examined the intestine closer. Part of the intestine appeared to be darker in color than the rest of the pink loop. "Looks like you've straightened it as you've lifted it out."

"What's the tissue like?"

"Not too good."

"Damn! We may still have to remove that section and reattach the intestine." Duo had been hoping that when the twist had occurred that it hadn't been severe enough to cut off the blood supply and damage the intestinal tissue. If the damage was minimal they could surgically remove the blockage and leave the intestine intact. But if the tissues were damaged to the point of dying off then they would have no choice but to remove that section of bowel and reattach. That would be riskier in the long run.

"Let's get rid of this blockage first and then see what condition the tissues are in." Zechs turned to look at the other vet for confirmation.

"Right with you, Zechs. I'll grab a few more cloths and another bowl. Whatever that crap in there is we sure as hell don't want it getting into anything else.

Zechs smiled beneath his mask. Duo did have a point. He looked at the horse, prone on its side with
a gaping hole in the flank and pink loops hanging out. *Not the best advertisement for equine surgery*, he thought to himself. Duo returned with the items and set them up. Once they were ready, Zechs pushed all the rest of the intestine back inside the abdominal cavity, leaving only the section they were working on out of the horse's body. Picking up the scalpel he began to make the careful incision.

* * *

Walker followed Heero along the path and into the small practice. Walking along the corridor he couldn't help but admire how clean, fresh and well set up everything was. Heero continued along until he came to the reception area, Walker right behind him.

"Looks like Hilde isn't here just yet. I'll check the diary and see how many clients we have booked in." Heero picked up the large, black book and scanned down the page. "It doesn't look like there's too many. Hilde should be able to cope with it by herself. If I get all the files out ready for her and ask her to leave them on the desk for me to log into the computer tomorrow she should be fine."

"Who should be fine?" came a voice from behind them.

"Hilde," Heero said as he spotted the woman.

"Hey, Heero. Where's Duo and who's this?" Hilde wasn't one to mince words but her tone was friendly.

"Ah, Hilde. This is Walker, he's the head groom at Miss Peacecraft's stud."

Walker offered his hand and then paused, puzzled as to the woman's reaction.

Hilde's eyes narrowed when she heard the introduction and she ignored the groom's hand. "You've got a nerve," she snapped and was about to continue when Heero brought her up short.

"Hilde! Please. Let me explain what's going on. Walker here is nothing to do with the other case." Heero began to explain the reason for Walker's presence. When he got to the bit where Zechs and Duo were currently operating he almost had to grab the woman to stop her from charging off and joining in.

Hilde remained where she was while Heero finished. Turning to the groom she gave a smile and extended her hand. "Sorry, I should be a little less hot-headed and not condemn people before I have the facts."

"It's okay," replied Walker. He had a pretty good idea of what was going on. He hadn't been told anything but you did get fairly reliable feedback from the grapevine.

"I was wondering if you would be able to cope with the evening's consults and the reception by yourself tonight, Hilde. I'll get all the client files out and put them ready. There aren't too many this evening and you can leave them all on the desk and I'll log them in tomorrow. I don't know how long Duo will be in surgery for and if they need a hand I'd like to be available. Also, Walker here shouldn't be left alone."

Hilde nodded. "I'll be okay, Heero. I've handled worse before and you really should be around if Duo or Zechs needs you. If I get stuck I can always call you."

"Thanks, Hilde."

"No problem, Heero. I hope they manage to save the horse. I'll warn you, once consults are finished
and I'm all done here, I'll be coming down to see how it all went."

Heero laughed. "As if I'd expect you not to."

Hilde grinned. "Can I help it if I have a fetish for blood and gore? Errr... sorry." Hilde noticed Walker starting to turn a little green. "Go on, you two, get out of here. I can find the client files myself."

Heero gave the vet a warm smile and went to leave. Walker paused at the doorway and turned back to the female vet.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"My pleasure to help in any way I can. I hope your horse is okay."

Walker nodded and followed Heero back out.

***

Treize was ready to tear his hair out. He felt like he'd scoured every street in Salsbury and still no sign of Relena. He pulled over and grabbed his cell, punching in Relena's number and waiting to see if it would connect.

It didn't.

Quelling the urge to scream and throw the cell out the window, Treize drew in a deep breath and called Heero's number.

"Yuy."

"Heero, it's Treize. Have you managed to contact Relena yet?"

"No. Have you had any luck?"

"Nothing. How's the horse?"

"No news yet. Zechs and Duo are still operating."

"I see." Treize paused for a moment. "I'll keep looking then. Meanwhile, you hear anything and you let me know, okay?"

"Will do, Treize."

"Thanks, Heero."

"Bye."

Treize put the cell back onto the passenger seat and resumed his search of the township.

***

Relena stepped out of the boutique and onto the sidewalk. "I'm hungry, Dorothy. How about we grab some lunch now?"

"Lunch sounds like a good idea," replied Dorothy. "Anywhere in particular you'd like to go?"

"There was a quaint cafe back a couple of blocks."
"Then let's head for there."

Relena smiled and began to walk down the street, Dorothy beside her.

They found the cafe and walked inside, sliding into a booth and picking up the menu from the center of the table. They discussed a few things on the menu before settling on their choices. The waitress came over and took their order; smoked salmon salad for Relena, the Quiche Lorraine for Dorothy and flat whites for them both. The coffees arrived and the two women sipped them whilst awaiting their food. It didn't take long for the lunch to arrive and the pair were soon eating away.

While they ate they discussed Relena's purchases. She'd bought herself two complete new outfits, three new blouses, two skirts, four pairs of shoes and a new purse. Dorothy had bought one new dress and a hat to go with it.

"I'd like to call at that small lingerie shop a couple of blocks over before we head home," said Relena as she finished off her salad. "They have the most exquisite stockings there and I could really do with some more."

Dorothy glanced at her watch. "We have the time."

"Good." With their lunch finished, Relena motioned for the waitress to bring the check. Leaving several dollars on the table, the pair exited the cafe and began the walk to the lingerie store.

It didn't take long for Relena to select what she wanted and with the purchases paid for, they stepped out of the small shop. Dorothy looked up and around the street to get her bearings and determine which way they needed to go to get back to the car when a familiar vehicle drove past. She squinted through the afternoon sun. "Isn't that Treize?" Dorothy said as the car slowed to a stop at the traffic lights.

"He's pulling over," said Dorothy as her eyes tracked the movement of the car and noticed it indicating as it went around the corner. Moments later Treize came running around the corner. "He doesn't look too happy about something," Dorothy muttered as she took in the harassed expression on Treize's face.

With a quick glance right and left, Treize bolted across the street to where the two women stood. "Relena, where the hell have you been?"

"Treize?"

"We've been trying to call you for the past few of hours."

"Oh? Are you sure? I haven't had any calls." Relena dived into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. She gave a sheepish grin. "Looks like I forgot to turn it back on when I left the hospital."

"What's wrong, Treize?" Dorothy interrupted, ignoring her mistress for the moment.
"It's Peacemillion. He's got colic, bad. Walker called the vet but the usual treatment didn't work. Doctor Merquise is certain he's twisted a bowel and he's operating now."

"What? Peacemillion... Colic?" Relena's skin visibly paled as she took in the news.

"Yes, colic. Relena, we've been trying to call you. Walker gave consent for the surgery when he couldn't get hold of you, he couldn't wait any longer."

"Is he?"

"I don't know what the status is at the moment. They're still in surgery. Relena, I think you should come back."

"Yes, yes, of course." Relena was looking a little shell shocked, Dorothy took charge.

"Come on, Treize. We'll come with you, I can pick my car up later." Dorothy took Relena by the elbow and began to guide her across the street to where Treize's car was parked.

"Peacemillion," muttered Relena. "Oh, god. I hope Doctor Merquise can help him." Relena didn't notice the way Treize's eyes lowered when she mentioned the vet's name. Dorothy though was a little more perceptive. She decided not to say anything for the moment. There was more going on here and she was sure that Treize would tell them soon enough.

With everyone in the car and buckled up, Treize began the drive back to the Maxwell practice. Once they were on the road, Treize pulled out his cell and called Walker.

"Walker."

"Walker, it's Treize. I've found Relena and I'm on my way back with her now."

"Thank god for that. Is she okay?"

"Upset, but that's to be expected."

"How long until you get here?"

Treize did a quick calculation in his head. "I'd say about half an hour."

"I'll keep an eye out for you."

"Any news on the horse?"

"Not yet. They're still operating."

"Okay. I'll see you soon."

"Right."

Treize disconnected the call and tossed the cell to the dash board.

"What happened?" Relena asked. "Peacemillion was fine this morning."

"From what I know, Walker got back from the feed store just before lunch and went to check on the horses. He found Peacemillion sweating and rolling. He called the vet who came out immediately and drenched him but it didn't work. Given the rapid decline in the horse's condition, Ze - Doctor Merquise suspected a twisted bowel and the best course of action is to operate."
"Oh dear. Do you know what's happening? Is Peacemillion going to be okay?"

"I don't know, Relena. The operation is still going," replied Treize

Listening in to the conversation while keeping an eye on the road, Dorothy noticed they weren't heading in the direction of Oakford. "Treize?"

"Yes?"

"This isn't the way to Oakford, unless you know a short cut," Dorothy said.

"The horse isn't at Oakford."

Relena's ears perked up and she turned to look at the man. "What do you mean, Peacemillion isn't at Oakford? That's where Doctor Merquise is from."

"Relena, I don't know the full story behind the change of operating venue. Walker does and I'm sure he will be able to tell you why once we get there. Once I learnt of what was happening I didn't wait to find out all the smaller details. I was more intent on finding you." Treize didn't say where the horse was, Relena hadn't asked yet and he really didn't want to be the one to tell her that Peacemillion was in Duo Maxwell's operating room and that Duo was also operating on her horse. He'd prefer to have a little more distance between him and the woman when that happened; or a good pair of ear plugs.

* * *

"No wonder he was in such pain," remarked Zechs as he carefully removed the mass of dirt and grass from inside Peacemillion's gut.

"Looks like it's been there for a little while," Duo said as he passed the bowl over for Zechs to drop the mass into. It was shiny and slippery, covered in the paraffin oil Zechs had administered.

"He probably picked this little lot up when out grazing in the paddock yesterday, I'd say." Zechs checked the bowel area to make sure he'd gotten all the offending matter from inside and then proceeded to remove the other feed that was clogged up in the intestine, unable to pass through because of the blockage.

Duo passed over a large syringe of saline for Zechs to flush out the site, careful to have the suction ready and remove all he could.

Having thoroughly irrigated the intestine, Zechs began to inspect the area where the twist had occurred. "What do you think?" he asked Duo.

Duo peered closely at the pink section. There was a slightly darker section where the tissues had been starved of oxygen and blood flow. "I think that part is pretty much dying off."

"I agree. I think the best thing to do would be to cut out a section from here to here and then reattach." Zechs indicated with his finger what he proposed.

"I'd be inclined to do the same. I think it would be his best shot at survival. If we leave it as it is the tissue will continue to die and then he's going to have a ruptured bowel within days. Not a good outcome. The section isn't all that large so his chances of making a full recovery are better than most."

"Thanks, Duo. I appreciate the input."
"No problem, Zechs. Often it's better to figure out the solution when there's two of you."

"Right. I'll remove this section then and we can begin to reattach the bowel."

"Right with you, Zechs." Duo removed all the instruments and other bits and pieces they didn't need and returned with a fresh set of surgical instruments. Better to have fresh equipment than risk infection. Checking the horse's vitals, Duo was pleased to see they remained steady.

Zechs began to cut away the dying section of tissue. They would only need to remove a piece about five centimeters long, but even that was five centimeters too much in Zechs' opinion. He'd have preferred not to have removed any.

The pair worked in silence, the clink of metal as an instrument was dropped into a dish or a soft word asking for scalpel or the like the only form of noise other than the beep of the monitors. With a sigh, Zechs finished cutting away the dying section and dropped it into the kidney dish.

"Now for the hard part," he muttered. "Stitching this back together." A drop of sweat rolled down his forehead and hung on the end of his nose. He wiped it away on the sleeve of his scrubs.

"I don't know about you, Zechs, but I could sure go a coffee right now," Duo mumbled as he threaded the fine, dissolving surgical silk through the eye of a needle.

"A long, cold beer would hit the spot for me," replied Zechs. Duo chuckled and handed over the needle.

Several more minutes passed with Duo passing over needles while Zechs stitched away. With a soft moan, Zechs stood up and eased the kinks from his back.

"Well, that's the intestine reattached. I can't see any possible leaks so he should be okay with that."

Duo checked over the site and gave a low whistle. "Neat job," he stated.

"Thanks. Guess we'd better get this mass all back inside properly and then close the wound."

"Here, I'll just give it a light dusting of Penicillin powder as an added precaution." Duo lightly dusted the area in the white powder and then assisted Zechs to replace Peacemillion's innards.

Zechs rubbed a weary hand over his face and closed his tired eyes for a moment.

"I can stitch up the rest if you like," Duo offered.

"You wouldn't mind?"

"Nah. I don't mind stitching. You want to see some of the animals I've had to sew up in the past."

Zechs had no doubt that Duo's stitching skills would be finely tuned given how he worked on some very small animals. "Then feel free to sew away. Right now my vision is getting a little blurry."

Duo took up the needle, forceps and placed the scissors close by. Lifting an edge of the abdominal cavity lining he began to stitch the cavity closed.

Another hour had passed by the time Duo was inserting the last stitch into the skin and his eyes were feeling heavy. A headache was tugging at the fringes of his mind and he longed for a hot shower, cup of coffee and to be held in Heero's strong embrace. With a weary sigh he dropped the needle into the kidney dish and straightened up slowly to admire his work. A neat row of stitches looked back at him and he smiled.
"All done," he said to Zechs.

"That looks great, Duo," Zechs replied as he took in the neat line. "I'll give him a shot of penicillin and a pain killer before taking him off the oxygen and then it's just a case of waiting for him to come round." Zechs did just that while Duo collected up all the used instruments and deposited them into a tray to be cleaned and then sterilized.

While they waited for the horse to come round, both vets began to clean up the operating theater, dumping all the used swabs and rubbish into the bin, bowls and surgical cloths to one side to be cleaned and then placing the removed piece of intestine into a sealed container. Zechs wanted to take it back to Oakford and have a look at it under the microscope. The mass that had been the blockage was sealed into plastic bag as Zechs also wanted to analyze that. Just as they were finishing off so Peacemillion began to stir.

Quickly the two vets were beside the horse, Duo untying the animal's legs and bringing the slings round ready. As Peacemillion returned to the conscious plane he began to struggle a little.

"Whoa there, boy," Zechs soothed and stroked the horse's neck. The stallion began to calm a bit.

"Might pay to give him a shot of mild tranquilizer as well," Duo said softly. "Just enough to keep him calm, we don't need him opening anything up."

"I agree," replied Zechs and quickly fetched the required drug, dosing the horse and preventing any further damage to any of them.

Gradually Peacemillion came around, he wasn't too steady at first and as they slid him gently off the operating table, the slings took up the strain of supporting his weakened legs. He swayed for a moment, his sense of balance slowly returning. After a few minutes Peacemillion was able to support his own weight comfortably and Duo let the slings go lax. He removed them from around the horse while Zechs held on to the halter.

"I think he can go out into one of the boxes now," said Duo as he watched the animal carefully.

Zechs agreed and Duo opened the operating theater doors. Slowly they led the recovering horse from inside and along the short breezeway to the box Duo said to use. It was thickly bedded with straw as opposed to sawdust that could stick to the healing wound. Zechs kept an eye on the horse while Duo filled a water bucket and set it within easy reach. Once everything was in place there was nothing left to do other than wait for the stallion to recover.

"He's got a good heart rate and his temperature isn't too high. His color's good too so I'd say he has a pretty good chance of making a full recovery," Duo said softly as he leaned over the door.

"And it wouldn't have been possible without your help, Duo. I'm deeply indebted to you. I can't thank you enough."

Duo waved his hand, dismissing the gratitude. "The best thanks I can get is to see the horse recover."

"You'll certainly be paid for your services as well as the use of the theater and reimbursed for the drugs."

"I know," Duo replied. "I'm just hoping all goes well."

The sounds of approaching voices drew them from their thoughts and they turned to walk out to meet the approaching people. Just as they were about to exit the building, Duo stopped. His feet were suddenly glued to the ground as he listened to the words.
"Why the hell did you bring him here?! That no good, two bit fairy assed excuse for a vet has probably killed him. I'll have his hide for this!"

Relena's voice carried the venomous words directly to Duo's ears. Beside him Zechs paled and then began to seethe. For a moment Duo was completely dumbfounded, then his anger surged forth.

Composing himself and barely keeping his rage in check, Duo began to stalk outside to where the owner of that voice waited.

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tbc.....
Chapter 36

Treize turned the vehicle into the driveway that would lead them to the stable area of the Maxwell Veterinary Practice, he took a glance at Relena in the rear view mirror and narrowed his eyes. He could see the shift in the woman's blue gaze and knew the storm was about to hit. Mentally he prepared himself as he brought the car to a stop in the car parking area and cut the engine. Quickly he undid his seat belt and exited the car.

Relena spotted the sign that read 'Maxwell Veterinary Practice' and her blood ran cold. Her anger began to seethe as her mind tried to wrap itself around the fact that her horse had been brought here of all places. Someone had better have a damn good explanation for this, as far as she was concerned she would certainly be having words with someone and heads would roll.

Dorothy took a deep breath and prepared herself for the fury she knew was about to be unleashed. The car came to a stop and Treize got out. Dorothy was quick to follow, seeing Relena's face clouding and her mistress' own rapid exit from the vehicle.

Up at the house, Heero had been keeping an ear open for the sound of an approaching car, Walker having informed him that Treize had located Relena and was bringing her back to the practice. Walker looked up as Heero got up and went to the kitchen window. Heero peered out and could see the distinct outline of Treize's car traveling along the driveway to the stables.

"Treize has arrived."

"We'd better get down there then," replied Walker.

Heero's lips set into a grim line as he put on his shoes and prepared to meet his boss and the woman that had caused them so much grief. The thought of the restraining order crossed his mind, but Heero pushed it to the back for the moment. Depending on how Relena reacted, Heero could always use the restraining order as a means to diffuse the situation. Besides, Treize hadn't known about the order so it really wasn't the woman's fault she was here.

Walker waited outside the door for Heero. He could tell there was something on the man's mind, but he didn't feel it was his place to ask what that was. Besides, he had other issues to worry about. Heero soon joined him and the pair headed for the stable block. As they neared so the sounds of angry voices reached their ears. Walker frowned in confusion; Heero broke into a jog.

Furious didn't even begin to describe what Relena was feeling; knowing that her prized stallion was somewhere on this faggot's property only caused her anger to rise. Knowing the queer vet had probably had his pansy hands on her horse enraged her even more. "Why the hell did you bring him here?! That no good, two bit, fairy assed excuse for a vet has probably killed him. I'll have his hide for this!" Relena hissed at Treize.

"Hold on a minute, Relena," Treize began. "I don't know the full story myself. I was just told your horse was here, seriously ill and being operated on by Doctor Merquise. No one could get a hold of you so I came looking for you."

"There's no way in hell I would have let Peacemillion come here if I'd known. I want a professional to deal with my horses, not some country hick, queer, so called dog and cat vet."

Duo and Zechs stepped out of the stable block, both still in their green scrubs, blood spattered and
tired. Duo had caught the last few words that Relena had spoken and his face darkened with rage. Three heads turned in their direction.

"You bastard!" Relena hissed. "How dare you touch my horse! I'll see your license is suspended for this, you poor excuse for a human being."

Duo saw red. "You bitch! You have no right to come onto my property and start accusing me of anything. I'll have you know, you pink piece of crap, that if Zechs hadn't contacted me your horse would be dead now. Believe me when I say, I only did this for the horse; if it had been you, I'd have left you to die in the fucking agony you deserve."

Zechs pulled up short, Treize automatically took a step back. The pure venom that was in Duo's voice shocked them both. They knew of the hatred between the two but had no idea it had escalated this far.

"How dare you! How dare you speak to me like that, you faggot. People like you give the human race a bad name."

"Why don't you open those fucking eyes of yours, cow, and see life and love for what it is? Just because a person can appreciate the same sex doesn't mean they're any different to anyone else. You're just so jealous you can't have my boyfriend as one of the prize studs in your stable that you're willing to go to any lengths to discredit me. I have news for you, bitch, it isn't going to work!"

"Perverted doesn't even begin to describe you, you pansy. You're the one that needs to wake up to yourself. Corrupting a decent human being like Heero with your faggoty ways! He's a proper man, a man with morals: a fine, upstanding human being, something you could never be," Relena sneered. "Heero doesn't need you and your sneaky, underhanded means of getting into his pants. I know you're doing something to him, something to make him act that way when he's nothing like you. He's not gay; he's a proper man, just like Treize and Doctor Merquise are. Maybe it's you that should open your eyes, queer, and leave innocent men alone."

Duo shook with rage, his fists balled up by his side. It was taking all his self control not to knock this stupid pink parasite on her ass. Fortunately for Duo, Heero arrived and had heard the last of the poisonous words spoken by Relena.

Treize and Zechs both looked a little stunned and turned their gazes to each other. Treize swallowed, Zechs fidgeted.

"Relena! That's enough!" stated Heero as he walked over to his boyfriend and stood at his side. "Calm down, Duo," he said soothingly before turning back to the woman before them. "Relena, I think there's a few things you need to know."

"I already know what you're going to say, Heero. But it's okay, I know you can't help yourself being under the influence of this, this, thing! You can't say how you really feel because if you do, he will find some way of getting back at you. Don't worry, Heero, I'm not about to let you suffer any more at the hands of this pervert."

It was Heero who now shook with suppressed rage. Slowly he turned his blue eyes towards the woman that had become the bane of his life. Those eyes were filled with an iciness that froze Relena to the spot. Gently, Heero placed an arm around Duo's waist and then began to speak, his voice cold and harsh. "Duo is the most loving, gentlest person I've ever met. He's giving, loyal and kind hearted. He's never done anything to hurt me and never would. He loves me and I love him just as much. He's my partner, boyfriend, lover, owner of my heart and soul and I have no intentions of ever leaving him. I don't know where you got the idea from that I was interested in you, but I can tell you
in all honesty that I've never been interested in you, or any other female for that matter. Relena, I'm gay; I've always been gay, a faggot, pansy, queer or any other name you insist on using. Duo's not corrupted me, I was the one that chased him, I was the one that convinced him I was the person for him. He's never had to drug me or force me into anything I didn't want to do. He doesn't have to, I'm more than a willing participant in this relationship and perhaps I need to reiterate this, I have no intention of leaving him." Heero turned back to Duo and cupped the vet's face with his hands. Gazing lovingly into Duo's eyes, Heero kissed his partner, long and deep, pouring his entire heart into the kiss. When they broke, Heero rounded on Relena again.

"Duo is mine, just as I am his; forever. The sooner you can accept that and move on, the better it's going to be for you, Relena." Heero turned back to his lover and kissed him again.

Relena stood in shocked silence, brain desperately trying to scramble and process the words she'd just heard as well as comprehend what her eyes were seeing. Heero, her Heero, was kissing that, that, creature! She turned her confused gaze to where Treize and Doctor Merquise were standing.

Seeing the look coming his way, Treize began to feel a little uncomfortable and automatically moved closer to the blonde vet. Zechs could also sense that Relena wasn't quite finished yet and shifted subtly closer to Treize.

"I still can't believe that you would bring my horse here and endanger its life further by having that gay excuse for a creature operate. I've a good mind to sue you too!" Relena spat. The shock of seeing Heero kissing that long haired vet had seriously rattled her.

"Relena, I think there's a few more things you should know," began Zechs. Before Relena could open her mouth and start again, Zechs continued. "Walker called me to attend your horse that had gone down with a serious case of colic. I tried all the usual, standard treatments, but they didn't work. It was obvious to me that the horse had sustained a twisted bowel and in order to save his life I needed to operate as soon as possible. I called my surgery to have the theater set up and the other vet and nurses prepped to give me a hand when our receptionist informed me that Doctor Alves was already using the theater for another patient and wouldn't be finished for at least another two hours. Peacemillion didn't have that sort of time. I knew Doctor Maxwell had a fully functional theater and it was close so I called him and he kindly agreed to let me use his facilities and offered to assist me as well."

"It still doesn't change the fact that that pansy has had his hands on my horse." Relena shuddered.

"What is it that has you so against gay people, Relena?" Zechs asked. "If Doctor Maxwell hadn't allowed me to use his theater or assist me, then your horse would most certainly be dead now. I couldn't have done the operation by myself."

"It's disgusting," snapped Relena. "Two men together."

Walker had watched the exchanges of words between the group in silence. While he wasn't opposed to gay people, he really hadn't had all that much to do with them either. He'd been pretty sure he'd have been able to pick a homosexual out though. It would seem he was wrong. He'd never pegged Heero for being gay. Personally though he couldn't give a damn if the Pope was to suddenly announce he was a practicing homosexual, all Walker cared about was that Peacemillion was going to be okay.

"Why is it disgusting?" asked Treize.

"It's not natural. Males shouldn't be with another male, they should be with a female. Only weak, feminine males chase after other men."
"You don't have to be weak or feminine to be gay, Relena," Treize said softly.

"No strong man would allow another guy to take advantage of him."

"I think you would be seriously surprised to know just how many of these so called 'strong' men as you put it are actually gay," said Treize.

"Besides," began Zechs, "I don't see that being gay affects a person's ability to function in their selected field of employment. Doctor Maxwell is a complete professional and his assistance with the operation was most welcomed."

Relena snorted. "Who knows what sort of contamination he's given Peacemillion with having his faggot hands on him."

"If you're so opposed to having a vet that's gay treat your horse, then why the hell have you called me in to treat your stock in the past?" Zechs was rapidly running out of patience. He wasn't about to stand here and see a good friend of his run down in such a manner, especially by Relena who obviously had no clear understanding of love in any shape or form.

"Pardon?" Relena's gaze turned back to the blonde vet.

Walker also stared, his mouth open. Well shit! he thought to himself. Looked like his 'gay-dar' needed a serious overhaul.

"I said, if you are so opposed to having someone that's gay treating your horses, why have you called me in?"

"But, you're not... Are you?" Relena paled.

"Yes, Relena. I'm gay too, have been for many years."

"But... You can't be. You're not the type." Relena was completely taken off guard with Zechs' admission.

"Like I said before, Relena. There isn't any set 'stereotype' that you can categorize gay people in. Those you least expect can be, and possibly are, homosexual," said Treize as he gently wrapped an arm around Zechs' waist and pulled the blonde to him.

Relena was gaping like a stranded fish by now. Finding her voice, she managed to form a few words. "Treize? Has the world gone completely mad? Not you too? Surely you can't be serious?"

"Ah, but I am, Relena. In fact, I'm what is commonly termed as bisexual. I enjoy both sexes," Treize replied.

"This can't be happening. No, this is all just a bad dream, that's it, I'm having a nightmare and when I wake up it will all be over and I'll be sitting at home waiting for Heero to call over and pick me up for our dinner date."

Zechs shook his head. "You're so like your mother, Relena. Completely in denial. When something comes along that you don't like or want to know about, you stick your head in the sand and hope it will all go away, just like the ostrich."

Relena's eyes narrowed. "What the hell do you know about my mother?" she demanded.

"Actually, I know quite a lot. She was, after all, my sister."
"Shit!" yelled Dorothy and sprang forward to catch her mistress as the woman fainted.

* * *

Dorothy, assisted by Walker who had also run forward when he saw Relena crumpling, managed to catch the falling woman and prevent her from seriously hurting herself, although her head did manage to connect with the ground a little hard. "We need to lie her down somewhere and elevate her feet," said Dorothy as she looked around, having checked her mistress' head and found nothing serious other than a bump beginning to form. The other four men remained where they stood, none of them offering to help.

With a sigh, Duo broke away from Heero. "Bring her up to the house," he said quietly. "You can put her on the couch, but don't expect me to be civil towards her. In fact, once she comes around I'd prefer it if you would remove her from my property."

"Thank you, Doctor Maxwell," replied Dorothy.

Walker bent to pick up Relena's limp form. Before he carried her to the house though, he paused and faced the two vets. "Look, I don't know what's going on here and frankly I don't give a damn, but I have a question for you."

Zechs nodded. "Ask away."

"How is the horse?"

Duo gave a soft chuckle and shook his head. With all that had been going on, no one had thought to report on Peacemillion's status.

"The operation was a success. The bowel was twisted and we managed to untwist it. We had to remove a small section and reattach the intestine, but all went well. Now it's up to Peacemillion. He's been given a shot of painkiller and antibiotics, and as long as he doesn't go galloping around the place he should make a good recovery. He will need to stay here for about a week before he can travel. Depending on how his recuperation goes at the end of the week we will either transfer him to Oakford or back to the Peacecraft stud," said Zechs.

Walker felt as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders with the good news. Now if only he could get rid of the weight in his arms. He shifted Relena to a more comfortable position. "Thank you, thank you both for all you've done," he said quietly and then turned to take Relena to the house, Dorothy beside him and Heero leading the way.

As the three began to leave, Duo and Treize both rounded on Zechs.

"You're Relena's uncle?" Duo asked, the disbelief clearly in his voice.

"I think you have some explaining to do, Zechs," Treize said as he stared at his lover.

Zechs scuffed the dirt with the toe of his boot. "Can I get cleaned up and changed first?"

Both Duo and Treize couldn't help but laugh, Zechs sounded like a naughty school boy caught doing something he shouldn't.

"Of course. I think the pair of you should change. I'll go on up to the house and meet you there, if that's okay, Duo?" Treize looked at the long haired vet for confirmation.

"You know you're always welcome, Treize. Go on, tell Heero we will be there as soon as we've
cleaned up," Duo smiled.

"Will do." Treize departed and the two vets went back inside the stable block to clean up.

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Duo couldn't help but sneak glances at Zechs as they washed themselves down. He knew there had to be a connection between the blonde vet and Relena, but never dreamt they were so closely related. Judging by Relena's reaction, she hadn't known either. He itched to ask questions but held his tongue. Zechs would explain in his own time, until then Duo had to be patient and wait.

Finally they were as clean as they were ever going to be without taking a shower and Zechs had changed back into his 'normal' clothes. Duo still wore his scrubs, his clothes were back at the house where he'd changed earlier.

"Time to face the music," said Zechs softly as he exited the small dispensary where he'd changed.

"I'm just going to check on Peacemillion first," replied Duo as he made his way over to the box where the stallion was recovering. Zechs followed behind and both vets hung over the stable door, eyes raking over their patient.

Peacemillion was standing in the corner of the box, resting a hind leg and dozing. The neat row of stitches could be seen along his side and all appeared to be well with the horse.

"He looks a lot more comfortable than you do," quipped Duo as he smiled at the other vet.

"Don't suppose there's any chance I could sneak off?"

"Not on your life, Zechsy. There's a shit load of questions waiting for you to answer," Duo snickered.

"Then I suppose I'd better get this over with." Zechs sighed and turned to walk to the house, Duo right beside him.

* * *

Walker placed Relena on the couch, Dorothy quickly placed a couple of cushions under the woman's ankles to raise her legs.

"I don't suppose you have any smelling salts at all?" she asked Heero.

"I'll check the medical kit." Heero disappeared to do just that, leaving Walker, Dorothy and Treize alone in the lounge room with the still unconscious Relena.

"I have to admit, this has all been a bit of a shock," said Dorothy.

"Personally I don't give a shit who's related to who or if the tooth fairy was the one to operate. All I care about is that Peacemillion is going to be okay," said Walker in his quiet tone.

"Tooth fairy?" Treize quirked an eyebrow.

Walker blushed and fidgeted. "Yeah, well..."

Heero returned with empty hands. "Sorry, we don't have anything remotely like smelling salts."

"Never mind. I'm sure she will come around soon. Once she does I'll take her back to the manor,"
Dorothy said. "Damn!"

"What?" asked Treize and Heero together.

"I don't have my car. It's still in Salsbury. We came back with you, Treize."

"That's okay," interjected Walker. "I have my car here with the float on, I can take you both back to the stud." Walker looked at the clock on the wall. "I'll need to get going soon though, it's getting closer to feed time and I'd prefer to be there to supervise."

Duo and Zechs entered the house just as Walker finished speaking. Four faces turned in their direction.

"She still out?" Duo asked.

"Yes, and I'm afraid we will have to leave very shortly as Walker needs to get back to supervise the feeding of the horses," replied Dorothy. "I hope that bump to her head isn't too bad."

"Look. Why don't you take Relena back home, I need to go back to Oakford and fill out the file on Peacemillion and let my boss know what's happened. Once I've done that I can call around to the stud. Relena should be conscious again by then and I can sit down and explain everything to her," said Zechs.

"I think that might be best," replied Dorothy. "I can call the doctor and have her head looked at and it would probably be better too if she is in familiar surroundings when you do talk to her, no offense, Doctor Maxwell."

"None taken. Personally I'd prefer it if she wasn't here either. I really don't have anything to say to the bitc... woman."

"I'll go bring the car and float around then," said Walker and disappeared out the back door to do just that.

"I think I'd better get going too," said Treize. "I'll call over as soon as I've finished helping Otto feed up, Dorothy."

"Thanks, Treize," replied Dorothy.

Zechs gave his lover a smile. He knew Treize wasn't just calling in as Relena's friend, he was also going to be there to support Zechs.

The sound of the car pulling up outside the back door signaled Walker's arrival and Treize carefully lifted the limp form of Relena from the couch. He carried her outside and placed her on the back seat, Dorothy climbing in after her.

"I'll get our shopping from your car when you stop by, Treize," said Dorothy.

Treize nodded. "I'll be round in about an hour."

"Thanks."

Walker stepped forward and shook both Duo's and Zechs' hands. "Thank you, both of you, for all you have done." Walker turned to Duo. "I'm sure we would have lost Peacemillion if you hadn't been so kind as to allow Doctor Merquise to use your facilities, and thank you for assisting him. Despite what my boss may say or do, I think you're one heck of a vet, Doctor Maxwell; and an
exceptional human being."

Duo blushed at the compliments and waved them aside. "I'm happy I was able to help, Walker. I don't like to see an animal suffering."

Walker nodded and went back to the driver's seat. Heero wrapped his arm around Duo's waist from behind and pulled the vet close to him. Heero smiled at Walker who returned it with one of his own and then started the car up. Once the vehicle had disappeared, Duo slumped in his lover's arm.

"I guess I should be going too and report back in to Oakford," said Zechs and turned to leave.

"Not so fast," Duo said. "You have a little explaining to do, Doctor Merquise."

Zechs lowered his eyes for a moment and sighed softly. "Would you mind if I came back later and explained? I really should get back to the clinic and write up this report. Then I need to go and explain to Relena. Once I've done that I'll call back around to check on the patient and fill you in."

"That's fine, Zechs," Heero answered on Duo's behalf. "We need to bring the horses in and get them settled for the night, I also need to go up to the surgery and log in all today's clients to the computer. Later would be better for us both."

"Thanks," replied Zechs.

"I'll get going too," Treize said. "I'll meet you over at Relena's in about an hour's time, Zechs."

The pair left together, hand in hand. Duo and Heero watched them leave. Once they were alone, Duo turned and gave his lover a warm kiss. "Thanks for being there for me, Heero."

"You didn't think I was going to sit back and let her insult you like that, did you?"

"I didn't know you were there or heard what she was saying."

"I didn't hear all of it, but what I did hear made my blood boil. She has no right to say those sorts of things."

"No, she doesn't." Duo snickered.

"What?"

"My knight in shining armor came to rescue me, and boy, did you give her an ear bashing. I kinda feel a little sorry for her though, all her dreams dashed like that, not to mention finding out that Zechs is also gay and her uncle to boot!"

"Shit happens," sniggered Heero. "She'll get over it."

"Did you really mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"What you said about me being the owner of your heart and soul, and that you want to be with me forever?"

"Cheesy, I know," replied Heero. "But yeah, I meant it, every word."

"God, I love you."
"Want to show me how much?"

"I'd love to, but later. Right now there's three nags out there that are demanding their dinner." Duo's stomach chose that moment to grumble - loudly. He gave a sheepish smirk. "And one vet that's also a bit peckish. Can I take a rain check?"

"By all means. I expect you to cash it in though later tonight."

"You can count on it."

* * *

Zechs drove back to Oakford and duly filled out the client files, noting the drugs and procedures he'd used on the horse. He also noted the length of time it had taken for the operation, the use of Doctor Maxwell's facilities as well as recognizing the other vet's assistance. Once all the formalities were dealt with, he spoke to Doctor Alves, bringing him up to speed on the case. His boss congratulated him on a successful treatment and promised to contact the Maxwell Veterinary Practice and personally thank them for their assistance, as well as get an invoice from them for what they owed the practice.

Having signed off, Zechs steeled himself for the next task ahead. His visit to Relena's and the explanation he needed to give. He wasn't looking forward to it at all. A lot of water had passed under the proverbial bridge over the years and he didn't particularly want to drag up old memories or open up barely healed wounds. But he had to; Relena had a right to know.

Taking a deep breath and promising himself a cold beer later, he climbed back into his car and headed for the Peacecraft stud.

Treize had headed home and assisted Otto to feed the horses in the stables. While doing so he filled Otto in on the current state of affairs, from Peacemillion's colic to having to find Relena and bring her back and the ensuing showdown between Duo and Relena. He also mentioned the revelations of Heero and Duo being a couple along with his and Zechs' admission to being together.

Otto remained silent throughout, it wasn't his place really to comment. He wasn't shocked though by the revelation of either his boss' sexuality or that of Heero. He'd suspected for some time that the pair of them were either gay or bisexual, but as he was only an employee, it wasn't his place to judge. Personally Otto couldn't care less what his boss did, his private life was his own. Otto had a good job, a decent boss and a fair wage, he wasn't about to jeopardize any of that simply because his boss liked the same sex. Treize had never made any advances to any of the staff; in fact he treated everyone fairly, so as far as Otto was concerned he had no reason to say anything.

Once the horses were settled for the evening, Treize went back inside to find Jenny had left his dinner warming in the oven for him. He quickly ate it and washed his plate through before taking a shower and heading over to the Peacecraft manor. Just over an hour had passed since leaving Duo's so Zechs shouldn't be too long in getting to Relena's and Treize wanted to be there to support his lover.

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Walker drove slowly and carefully back to the stud, aware of Relena's still unconscious form on the back seat. He didn't say anything, preferring to concentrate on the road ahead.

Dorothy made sure Relena was as comfortable as she could be and then gazed out the window. Her mind was tumbling with all the information it had received. She wasn't shocked to discover the
relationship between Doctor Merquise and Treize, she'd had her suspicions for a while. It didn't matter to Dorothy one bit if Treize was heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. What he got up to in his private life was his affair, she did though hold a feeling of apprehension. Relena could do a lot of damage to Treize and Doctor Merquise.

That led her to the next thought. Doctor Merquise was Relena's uncle? Now that put a whole new light on things and raised a completely new set of questions. Knowing the vet was her uncle, would Relena still try to discredit the vet, and Treize? What damage would she do to Treize's career? Would she still supply him with horses to jump, or would she sever all ties? Would blood run thicker than water? Would Walker please hurry up and get them home, as she was starting to get a headache?

As if sensing the unease settling in Dorothy, Walker spoke. "Should be home in about five minutes."

"Thanks, Walker."

As Walker turned the car and float into the driveway that would lead them to the manor and stables beyond, Relena began to stir. Walker brought the car and float to a stop by the front doors and got out to help Dorothy take Relena inside.

"What happened? Where are we?" Relena asked as she came to.

"Hush, Miss Relena. You're home now and we're going inside. I'll explain everything to you once we get indoors," replied Dorothy as she assisted her boss into the manor. "Thank you, Walker," she said to the groom as they entered the large foyer. "I'll be able to manage from here."

"Are you sure?" Walker didn't really want to stay around, he had work to do, but it was polite to offer his assistance.

"I'll be fine. Thank you."

"As you wish." Walker left and took the car and float down to the stable area and went about his duties.

Dorothy managed to coax Relena into the sitting room where she made her mistress lie down on the couch. "I'll go make us a nice cup of tea. You stay right there, Miss Relena."

"Dorothy?"

"Yes?"

"I had this really weird dream. Peacemillion was sick and that pansy vet, Maxwell treated him. Treize was there as well, also Heero and the vet from Oakford, Doctor Merquise. My Heero was kissing that faggot and then Treize said he was gay as well. Then that other vet said he was also gay and began to hug Treize. He also said he was my uncle." Relena turned her confused eyes to her housekeeper.

Dorothy looked away.

"Dorothy?"

Dorothy returned her gaze to her mistress.

"Tell me it was a dream... It was a nightmare, wasn't it?"

Dorothy shook her head. "I'm sorry, Miss Relena. It wasn't a dream."
Relena could tell from her housekeeper's eyes that Dorothy was telling the truth. "Oh my god. Is the whole world going insane?" She turned her head away.

"Relax, Miss Relena. I'll go make that tea. Doctor Merquise and Treize will be here shortly to explain everything."

Dorothy left to go make the tea, Relena turned and gazed out the window, dusk was coming, shrouding the landscape with its shadowy presence. Relena felt the shadows creep into her own heart.

In the kitchen, Dorothy wondered if it mightn't be a good idea to find a bottle of brandy to take out with the tea. She had a feeling they would all be needing something a little stronger than tea when all was said and done.

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tbc....
Unfortunately, Dorothy couldn't find anything stronger than the imitation brandy used in cooking in the kitchen, or the rest of the house for that matter. She guessed that if the worst came to the worst she would have to use that. The kettle boiled and she made a pot of tea, setting the tea-cosy over it and then placing the teapot, cups, saucers, milk and sugar onto a tray and carrying them through to the sitting room.

Relena remained on the couch where Dorothy had guided her earlier. Her mind was abuzz with questions, questions she desperately wanted answers to. She also had a headache. In the past hour her entire world had been rocked on its axis and she was finding it difficult to find her balance again. Relena looked up as Dorothy entered with the tea tray.

Setting the tray down on the small coffee table, Dorothy went about pouring the tea, adding milk and sugar before passing her mistress a cup and taking another for herself. She sat down in the armchair opposite and sipped her tea. There were so many things she wanted to say and knew Relena did also, but she was content to wait and let her boss speak first. She didn't have to wait too long.

"How can this Doctor Merquise possibly be my uncle?"

"I don't know, Miss Relena, I guess you will have to wait for him to get here and explain it to you," replied Dorothy.

"Surely my mother would have told me she had a brother? I don't recall her ever talking about him and I never saw him at any of the family gatherings." Relena frowned as her mind backtracked to her childhood. "I'm sure I would have remembered him."

"Your mother must have had her reasons."

"Why on earth wouldn't she have mentioned him?" Relena continued to ponder the question while Dorothy watched her closely.

Dorothy had no idea either. She'd never met Relena's mother, having come to work for Relena only a couple of years ago. There was one thing for certain though, this Doctor Merquise had better have proof of his claims.

Relena's mind decided to change course and leave the enigma of her so called 'uncle' until the man got here and explained all.

"How's your head?" Dorothy asked. "You took quite a knock to it when you fainted."

"I'll live," replied Relena as she rubbed the tender spot.

"Would you like some panadol?"

"If you don't mind, that would be good." Relena had a feeling her headache was going to get a whole lot worse before it got better.

Dorothy went back through to the bathroom and rummaged in the small medical kit. Finding the panadol, she popped two of the white capsules from their protective bubbles and carried them back through to the sitting room. "Would you like a glass of water to swallow them with or stick with the
"I'll take them with the tea, thanks." Relena quickly swallowed the pills.

Dorothy wondered if maybe she should have checked to see if there had been any valium in the medical kit given the lack of alcoholic substances. She dismissed the thought though when Relena began to speak again.

Relena began to think about Heero again and the words he'd spoken to her, also the revelation of both Treize and Doctor Merquise that they were gay, or bisexual, as the case may be. "I still can't understand how Heero could possibly be gay," she said softly.

"Relena, haven't you heard the saying, 'never judge a book by its cover'? I'm afraid you have a lot to learn about life that way. Just because a man may talk a little differently or act a little more feminine than others doesn't necessarily mean he's gay. Likewise, someone who is muscle bound, like the weightlifters, or works in a physical environment such as construction work, doesn't mean they aren't gay. I'll bet there are many men, and women too, that you interact with that are gay and you wouldn't have a clue about it."

"But, Heero doesn't seem the type..."

"There isn't any set 'type', Relena. Take a look at Treize."

Relena frowned. "I would never have dreamt Treize would be with another man, especially as I've seen him with women."

"Ahh, but as Treize said, he's bisexual, he enjoys both sexes."

"It still isn't right." Whatever Relena was going to say next was interrupted by the sounds of a vehicle approaching.

Dorothy stood up and glanced out the sitting room window. "Treize is here," she said quietly.

"Then I guess you'd better let him in."

Dorothy left the sitting room and her mistress to open the door to the man.

Treize got out, grabbed all the parcels the women had left in his vehicle earlier and locked his car, noting the front door to the manor opening and Dorothy stepping out to meet him. He pocketed his keys and strode over, carrying the various packages. "Zechs not here yet?" he asked, even though it was quite obvious the blonde vet hadn't arrived, Treize's car being the only one present.

"No, he hasn't. I don't think he will be too much longer though. Thanks for bringing the packages, Treize."

"No problem. I'll carry them in for you."

"Thanks." Dorothy led the man inside and to where he could dump the parcels.

"How is she?" Treize voiced the question that had been on his lips since he'd arrived.

Dorothy shrugged. "Okay, I guess. You have to remember she's had a pretty big shock to her system and it's going to take a while for it to all sink in and she accepts it; if that's all she ever does."

"I really don't think she had any choice but to accept all she's been told, especially after Heero's little speech."
Dorothy gave a soft laugh. "You do have a point there. I know I shouldn't laugh, but in all reality, she did have it coming. I'm glad I suppose that Heero did say the things he said, maybe now she will give up on this obsession of hers. I was seriously beginning to wonder if I should have had the doctor come and look at her, what she was doing wasn't exactly what I would call the actions of a person in their right mind."

"Surely you're not suggesting Relena was losing her marbles?"

"No," Dorothy snickered. "I would never say she was insane. No, more like she was developing some sort of obsessive disorder, the infatuation she has with Heero is causing her to be completely oblivious to anything else. As far as she's concerned, Heero should be with her and Doctor Maxwell was the villain in keeping the guy away from her. No, she really needed to hear it from Heero himself that he wasn't interested in her."

"I'd say she got the message then, not only from the words but the actions too," Treize chuckled.

"I hope so."

The sound of an approaching car caused them to break off their conversation and Dorothy looked out the window to see another vehicle approaching.

"That's Doctor Merquise," said Treize as he looked over Dorothy's shoulder.

"I'll go let him in then."

"I'll come with you."

Zechs brought the car to a stop and turned the engine off. As he got out of the car, Treize and Dorothy stepped out of the manor door to greet him. He locked the car and walked swiftly to the pair. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long."

"No, not at all, Doctor Merquise," replied Dorothy.

"I've only just got here myself," added Treize with a warm smile. He could tell that his partner was uncomfortable and he really couldn't blame the man, although he was more than a little curious himself as to Zechs' former secret. Since becoming a couple they had discussed many things in their lives, although when Treize thought about it, Zechs had never revealed anything about his past family life. Looked like he was about to find out why.

Zechs smiled back at his boyfriend and then turned to Dorothy. "How is Relena? Has she come around yet? I hope the bump to her head isn't serious."

"Relena is okay and resting in the sitting room. She's got a slight headache, but that's to be expected. I don't think the bump has caused any problems, but I will get the doctor if I think she needs to see one. Now, if you would care to follow me I have tea waiting in the sitting room."

"I suppose asking for a scotch is out of the question?" Zechs said with a hopeful look.

Dorothy quirked an eyebrow.

"Purely for Dutch courage," Zechs clarified.

"Doctor Merquise, trust me when I say I've already ransacked the cupboards and the only thing remotely alcoholic I could find was the cooking brandy, and even that's imitation."
"Oh well, it was worth a try." Seemed he would have to wait until after the inquisition for that beer then.

"I'd suggest bringing it out anyway, Dorothy. The taste buds aren't going to know it's imitation," said Treize with a snicker.

Dorothy gave Treize a *look*. "Get in line, Treize, I've already got first dibs on the bottle."

Treize shook his head, he couldn't believe he'd heard those words come from the housekeeper's mouth. Zechs snickered.

"Come on, Relena and the tea are this way." Dorothy exited, the two men behind her.

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Relena looked up from her position on the couch as Dorothy reentered the sitting room. "Treize and Doctor Merquise are here."

Both men felt a little uncomfortable, which was understandable given the earlier circumstances and their reasons for being here now.

Relena gave them both a nod. "Please, take a seat," she said, remembering her manners. "Dorothy will pour you some tea." Relena was also uncomfortable, not sure how she should act around the pair. She decided not to worry too much about that at the moment, right now she wanted answers. Unsure of how to start the conversation and ask the questions she wanted answers to, Relena fidgeted for a moment.

Dorothy poured the tea and handed each man a cup before sitting down again. Despite the fact that she was only an employee, she wasn't about to leave the room and miss out on all the information. Miss Relena would need her here for support, at least that's what she told herself. Her eyes went from person to person as the silence grew thicker. She gave a soft sigh. It seemed that no one was interested in starting off anything remotely like conversation. Enough was enough.

"How is Peacemillion?" she asked, desperate to start the ball rolling. Dorothy figured if she could get the vet talking about the horse then she should be able to steer the conversation in the direction they all wanted answers for.

Relieved that someone had spoken, Zechs replied. "Peacemillion is doing as well as can be expected at the moment. We were lucky we managed to get him to surgery and operate when we did. If he had gone much longer then it's doubtful he would have survived."

"Thank you."

The words were spoken so softly that Zechs was unsure if he'd heard them or not. He raised his eyes to meet Relena's. He could see confusion, anger and pain swirling in those blue depths and his heart ached. He ached for the niece he'd never known, for his sister who was barely a memory, but most of all he ached for the family he'd lost. "I guess I owe you an explanation," he said softly.

"I have to admit, it's not every day you find yourself with a relative you didn't know existed. An explanation would certainly help."

"Relena? You say you find the thought of a same sex couple together disgusting, gay people repulse you and you harbor a hatred for anyone who falls into that category. What I'm about to tell you may explain why you react this way." Zechs finished off his tea and placed the cup back on the tray.

Sitting back into the chair, he crossed his long legs at the ankle, folded his hands in his lap and after a
moment's contemplation, began his story.

"I don't know how much of your mother's childhood you know, but I'll start at the beginning and I apologize if I'm repeating things you already know. Your mother and I grew up in Croydon on a rather large estate. Our parents ran what was known as a livery stable. Not your ordinary agistment center, but a livery stable that catered for the more wealthy clients and their horses. They charged high fees, but provided excellent service in return. The stables were always full of top quality horses and your mother and I would spend our free time helping out wherever we could, from filling up water buckets to cleaning out the stables. I guess that's why we both had a love of horses." Zechs looked at Relena to see how his explanation was going so far.

"Mother did mention she'd grown up around horses, although she didn't divulge a lot of the details. She would tell me some stories from time to time about some of the horses and people that kept their animals there, but she never mentioned you," Relena replied.

Zechs dropped his eyes and continued. "I was around sixteen, your mother was fourteen, when she started to bring some of her friends home. I didn't like many of them, too giggly and full of themselves, always preening and trying to outdo each other with their makeup and clothes. They always managed to seek me out, try to play up to me and get me to notice them. I wasn't interested. At first I thought it was because I was too busy with my studies. I was a straight A student and had decided I wanted to go to Veterinary college. To pass the entrance exams I needed to have top grades and devoted most of my time to studying. It wasn't until your mother started to date herself and bring some of her boyfriends home that I realized why I wasn't interested in girls. I found myself checking out her boyfriends, and not in a concerned, brotherly way either." Zechs took a deep breath before continuing.

"Some of the clients would bring their sons or daughters to the stables on weekends and that's when I met Robin. He was a year older than me, his father a prominent business man and politician. My father and Robin's dad would spend a lot of time together discussing the political world, leaving me to entertain Robin. We got on well together, talked a lot and found we had similar interests. I also discovered that Robin was gay. He was the one that introduced me to my sexuality. After being with Robin, I knew I could never have a relationship with a woman. We continued our secret affair, meeting wherever and whenever we could. We had plans, were madly in love and had mapped out a future together; or so I thought. Then, it all came crashing down." Zechs' voice hitched a little as his mind supplied him with memories he thought he'd long ago buried.

Feeling the anguish rolling off his lover, Treize moved in his chair and brought his hand to rest upon Zechs' shoulder, squeezing it lightly. Zechs gave him a small smile of appreciation and then continued.

"It was two days after graduation. I'd graduated with honors, top of my class in most subjects and my father had organized a celebration dinner. I'd also received a letter in the mail that day to tell me I'd been accepted into Veterinary college so the celebration was to be for both achievements. I'd called Robin to give him the good news and he was ecstatic. My father had invited a few close family friends to join us, Robin and his family amongst them. Everyone came to the house that evening, cocktails were served followed by a four course dinner. The wine flowed and conversation was merry. I received many congratulations and was so happy I thought I would burst. After the meal was finished, everyone went through to the library to enjoy brandy and talk some more. Robin and I managed to sneak off to enjoy a little time together - alone." Zechs stopped, his voice hitching and he looked at Dorothy. "May I have a glass of water, please?"

"Of course." Dorothy got up and quickly went to fetch the requested water. The tale the vet was telling had captured her interest and she didn't want to miss anything of it. She returned and handed
over the glass of water.

Zechs took the glass and swallowed gratefully. He took a moment longer to regain his composure and then picked up the tale again. He knew this part was going to be the hardest.

"We snuck out of the house and went to the stables, pretending to be checking the horses. Once we were sure we weren't being followed, we headed into the feed shed, went around the back and over to where the hay was stored. I won't go into all the details, for obvious reasons, but, we were enjoying our own form of celebration in the hay when we were caught." Zechs closed his eyes for a few seconds and then opened them again, the pain was clear to see inside those sapphire depths.

"I don't know what brought my father out to the stables that night, I suppose he was just checking on the horses, or showing Robin's dad his latest livery, but anyway, they heard us and came to investigate. We were literally, caught in the act... I can still remember the look of pure hatred on my father's face as he stared at me, the desperation in Robin's voice as he pleaded for his father to understand. It didn't matter though, neither one of them was interested in anything we had to say. My father grabbed the first thing he could, which happened to be one of the long training whips from the shelf and came at me. He proceeded to whip the living daylights out of me with that thing... Robin, he, he tried to come and protect me, went to grab my father and take the whip off him, but..." A soft sob escaped Zechs' throat and he fought again to regain his composure.

"What happened, Zechs?" Treize asked softly as he sat on the arm of the chair and rubbed soothingly at the vet's back. He didn't give a damn that Relena was there, that he was in another person's home. His boyfriend was hurting and Treize needed to comfort the distressed man.

"As Robin went to grab my father's wrist, my father pushed him away. Robin didn't know his own dad was coming from the side to also stop him and the force of my father's push caused Robin to collide with his dad. His dad fell into the sacks of grain; Robin fell into the hay stack."

"Surely the hay would have been a softer landing that the feed sacks," Relena started to say.

"Not when there's a pitch fork in it."

The room went deathly quiet.

"Robin didn't stand a chance. The fork went right through his chest, pierced his heart and a lung. He died in my arms."

"Oh god," Dorothy said quietly as she placed her hand over her mouth in shock.

"There was a bit of a cover up, of course, only my father, Robin's dad and myself knew the entire truth. The police report read 'death by misadventure'. The police were told that Robin and I had drunk a little too much at the party, we'd gone outside to check on Robin's horses and wandered into the feed shed where we had both passed out from the amount of alcohol we'd drunk. Robin had unfortunately passed out in the hay stack and landed on the pitch fork. When we didn't return for a while, our dads came looking for us and that's when they found Robin. Once the police had finished with their inquiries and closed the case, my dad beat me black and blue. He told me to get myself out of his house, that he was cutting me out of his will and wanted nothing further to do with me. As far as he was concerned, he had no son and if I ever showed my face around him or the family again, he would kill me. I packed up and left, I didn't even get to go to Robin's funeral and that's what hurt the most."

Treize didn't say a word, he simply put his arm around the vet's shoulders and pulled him close, offering what little comfort he could.
"I don't know what my father told your mother, Relena, but I gather he spun some horrific tale. I tried to contact her once, just to find out how she was doing. She hung up on me, claiming she had no brother. I never tried again. I did keep track of the family though, mainly your mother. Even if she and they didn't want to have anything more to do with me, I needed to know what was happening to them. I heard about her marriage to your father and then your birth. By then I had qualified as a veterinary surgeon and was doing locum work. I lost track of you and your mother and it wasn't until I was here in Salsbury a couple of years ago that I managed to find you again. By then of course my parents were dead and I learned of the passing of my sister and your father too. I had hoped to contact you and introduce myself as your uncle, explain why you had never been told of me and hopefully regain my family once more. But, when I did finally meet you and saw your reactions to people who enjoy the same sex relationships, it was clear to me that your mind had also been poisoned and so I decided to keep my secret. I guess I would have kept it a lot longer too if you hadn't put on your little 'display' earlier. Relena, I'm sorry you had to find out this way, but I can't keep it from you any longer." Zechs collapsed back into the chair, completely drained.

Dorothy's mind was running a mile a minute and she wasn't sure just how to react. Treize's mind was also processing the words Zechs had spoken, the tale he'd told. On the couch, Relena looked like she'd been hit by a truck.

The silence remained in the room, weighing the occupants down as they each sorted through their thoughts. Eventually, Relena spoke. "Doctor Merquise. I appreciate you coming here and being honest with me today. I have to say that's one heck of a story you've told and it will take me some time to fully come to terms with it. I would appreciate it if you would all leave now, I have some thinking to do. I will contact you, Doctor Merquise."

Zechs and Treize rose, pausing before Relena on their way out.

"I know how much of a shock this must be to you, Relena, and I quite understand you needing time to think it over. I do have proof of who I am, I have my birth certificate and I'm sure that when you compare it with your mother's birth certificate you will find the same names listed as the father and mother for me as for her. I truly hope you can see things a little clearer now and not condemn people simply on face value. As my only living relative, I hope we can become friends." With the words spoken, Zechs turned and left the sitting room.

"I'll be in touch later, Relena," said Treize and then left to catch up to his boyfriend.

Dorothy saw them out, promising them both she would keep a close eye on Relena and let them know how she went along. Once the door was shut, Dorothy returned to the sitting room where Relena was locked deep in thought.

* * *

Leaving the Peacecraft stud behind, Treize followed Zechs' car along the road in the general direction of Duo's practice. He wasn't surprised though when Zechs pulled off the road and into the parking lot of one of the many country pubs.

"I need a drink," Zechs said as he exited his car and headed into the cozy pub.

They ordered two scotches on the rocks and sat down at a small table to drink them. Treize didn't press for any further details, he figured Zechs had done enough talking for now, there would be time later for the two of them to discuss things. They downed their drinks, neither man talking, opting to listen to the hum of conversation around them. After a few minutes, Zechs stretched and turned to his lover.
"I guess I should continue on to Duo's. I need to check Peacemillion and I owe them an explanation as well."

Treize discreetly ran his hand along Zechs' arm. "This doesn't change anything between us."

Zechs offered a warm smile. "Thanks."

"I mean it. I still care for you and I want you to know that your past makes no difference to me, if anything it makes me care more for you, knowing all you have had to endure."

Swallowing back the lump in his throat, Zechs lowered his eyes. "We really should get going, I have to check on the patient and talk to Duo. Then I think I would like to curl up with a bottle of scotch and drown my sorrows."

"I have a bottle at home," Treize offered, "And a warm couch and good company if you're interested."

"That would be lovely."

* * *

Once everyone had departed from the Maxwell Practice, Duo gave Heero a hand to bring the horses in and feed up for the night. Heero was busy putting Zero's rug on while the stallion was doing his best to check out the new comer.

"Zero! Stand still!" Heero chastised as the stallion snatched a mouthful of feed and then shot back to the door to hang over it and snort threats to the other horse.

Peacemillion took no notice.

Duo couldn't help but snicker. "Having a few problems, Heero?" Duo asked as he exited Scythe's stable and locked the door behind him.

"You could say that," muttered Heero. "Zero! Enough!" Heero gave the stallion a sharp smack to the shoulder. Zero ignored him.

"Want a hand?"

"Please."

Duo entered the stallion's stable and grabbed his halter, bringing the gray to a halt. "Hey, stop it, Zero," he growled as he gave the halter a sharp tug.

Zero stopped and looked at the human that usually fed him carrots. The tone of the human's voice told him the human wasn't happy with him. Zero lowered his head and gave the nice human a soulful look.

"That isn't going to work, you rogue," Duo scolded and gave the halter another tug.

Heero went to finish doing up the straps on Zero's rug while Duo held the stallion still. "I guess I can't really blame him," Duo said. "He's only doing what instinct says he should. He can scent the other stallion and perceives him to be a threat."

"It's still no excuse for him to forget his manners," Heero stated and then straightened. He took the halter from Duo and fixed the stallion with his eyes. "Now listen here, Zero. You behave yourself. Peacemillion is sick; he's no threat to you or your family so get used to it. Keep this up and I'll leave
you out in the paddock in future."

Zero didn't understand a word of what his master said but he knew from the tone that he'd been naughty. The gray hung his head and then softly nuzzled against his master.

"You're not forgiven that easily either," Heero said, but patted the horse anyway.

Zero returned to his feed and seemed to settle down a bit. Scythe didn't give a damn about any new horse, she had her dinner under her nose and nothing short of an earthquake was going to drag her away from her feed. Shini couldn't really understand what all the fuss was his sire was making, but then again, he was only a colt and not mature enough yet to think about such things as herd behavior or protecting mares.

Checking Peacemillion once again, Duo decided to wait until Zechs returned and had a look at the horse before offering the stallion anything to eat. They exited the stables together, Duo pulling the sliding door across and then walking hand in hand to the house. Halfway there they were met by Hilde who demanded to know all the details of the operation.

Duo made her wait until they were back in the house and then filled her in. Hilde could also tell there was something else going on but refrained from asking until Duo had finished telling her about the operation. Once Duo was done, Heero gave her a simplified version of what occurred when Relena showed up.

"Oh, my! I wish I could have been there to see you give her a piece of your mind, Heero. I'd have given anything to witness her reaction. About time you stood up for yourself though. Good on you."
Hilde bounced over to Heero and gave the man a hug and kiss to the cheek. "I hope that pink parasite listens and leaves you two alone from now on."

"I hope so too," replied Duo. He was starting to feel a little tired, the day's activities beginning to catch up with him.

"I'd better get going," said Hilde. "Oh, Heero? No need to worry about putting the client files on the computer, I've already done them. Consults were slow so I logged them into the database when I had some spare time."

"Thanks, Hilde."

"No problem. I'll see you tomorrow, guys."

"See you later, Hilde, thanks," said Duo.

Heero walked the vet to the door and bade her goodnight. Returning to the kitchen, Heero let a soft smile play over his lips. Duo was still sitting at the table, arms folded on the table top and his head resting on his arms. "Tired?" he asked as he moved behind his lover and began to massage one shoulder with his good hand.

"Exhausted. Mmm... that feels nice."

"I'll get us something quick to eat, Zechs will be back soon to check Peacemillion. Once he's gone I'll continue this massage for you."

"Promise?" Duo's eyes were hopeful.

Heero chuckled. "I'll take you through to bed and give you a full body massage," he said in a husky tone.
Duo melted.

* * *

Duo sighed, the puff of air escaping his mouth blowing his bangs out of his eyes. He turned to Zechs, his expressive eyes full of sorrow. Heero also sat quietly, absorbing the story Zechs had just told them. His heart ached for the blonde vet whom he had come to think of as a dear friend.

"Man, that really sucks," said Duo, breaking the silence.

Zechs shrugged. "It all happened a long time ago. I've come to terms with it and while it still hurts, I have to move forward."

"I admire your courage, my friend," said Duo softly.

"No wonder Relena is so opposed to gay people," began Heero. "If she was brought up in that sort of an environment then it makes sense why she's as bigoted as she is."

"I agree. But it still doesn't give her the right to go around accusing people of 'perverting' others by foul means," replied Duo.

"No, it doesn't," said Zechs.

The four sat around Duo's kitchen table, Treize and Zechs each with a beer in front of them that they’d purchased when leaving the pub; Heero and Duo had coffee.

"Thanks for explaining all that to us, Zechs. It couldn't have been easy for you to do and I appreciate you trusting us with your past. Hopefully Relena will learn something from this," said Heero quietly.

"Amen to that," muttered Duo.

"I guess we can always live in hope," added Treize.

Zechs laughed and then rubbed his tired eyes. He glanced at the clock. "I think we had better get going, Treize. I'm tired and I know Duo must be as well, plus I need to check Peacemillion yet."

"Okay." Treize stood up and gathered the two empty bottles into his hand, depositing them into the bag for recycling.

"I've checked on him a couple of times and he's doing well so far," said Duo as he stood and put on his boots. "If he's still showing signs of improvement I think it might be an idea to see if he will eat something."

"I agree," replied Zechs. "A warm, bran mash should be enough." [1]

The four headed out and down to the stables. Zechs entered the stallion's stable and took the horse's temperature, heart and breathing rates, pleased to see that they had stabilized. Peacemillion was looking a lot better and his skin color had returned to a healthy, salmon pink. "I think we can safely try him on a bran mash," said Zechs as he stepped out of the stable.

"I'll go make one," said Heero and disappeared into the feed shed.

The three remained outside until Heero returned, Duo taking the feed from him and putting it in the feed bin. Peacemillion shuffled over and sniffed at the feed. He lipped at it and then began to eat, chewing slowly and methodically.
"Now that's a good sign," said Zechs with a smile.

"Sure is," replied Duo.

They watched the horse eat for a few more minutes before Zechs and Treize took their leave. Heero and Duo walked back inside the house, Duo heading for the shower while Heero locked up.

Duo exited the shower feeling a little refreshed but still tired. Wrapping a towel around his waist he headed into the bedroom and stopped at the door. His eyes widened at the sight that greeted him.

Heero was reclining on the sheets, completely naked, half aroused and clutching a bottle of oil. A sultry smile played over his lips. "I believe I promised you a full body massage, Doctor Maxwell?"

Duo let the towel drop and sauntered to the bed completely at ease with his nudity. He could feel his own erection starting to form and licked his lips. "If I remember correctly, I have a rain check to cash in?"

"That you do. Now, come here and make yourself comfortable."

Duo didn't need any second invite.

~ * ~

tbc...

[1] Bran Mash: This is a feed made up from mainly bran with some chaff, lucern chaff and depending on the horse, some concentrates may be added. It's dampened down with a mixture of warm water and molasses. It's usually fed to a sick or recovering horse and is easy on the digestive system. I suppose you could call it the equine equivalent to chicken soup. ^_^
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Heero watched from his place on the bed as Duo walked over and climbed on the mattress next to him. His heart began to beat erratically in his chest, a warm feeling stole over him and he felt his arousal rising further. "On your stomach," he told the long haired vet.

Duo complied, easing his body into the cool sheets and laying down. He rested his head upon the pillow, turned sideways and watched as Heero moved to his side and opened the bottle of oil. The cool bite of the oil met with warm skin and Duo shivered. Heero chuckled and continued to drizzle more of the oil across Duo's shoulders and along his spine. When Heero deemed there to be enough oil on his partner's skin, he set the bottle down on the side table and moved to straddle Duo's hips. Naked skin met and tingles raced along spines, arousing the pair further. Carefully shifting so his erection didn't rub along Duo's cleft, Heero settled into a more comfortable position and began to work with his one hand at the tired, knotted muscles of Duo's shoulders.

The subtle shift didn't go unnoticed by Duo, but he was pleased that his lover was more concerned with easing the kinks from his body before moving onto other areas that craved attention. Duo relaxed into the touch, letting his mind close off from the day's stress and concentrate only on the movement of Heero's hand. Even with only one hand, Heero could give a damn fine massage.

Heero took his time, working slowly over the muscles of Duo's shoulders and then moving lower to the tight muscles of Duo's back. Once those were loosened, Heero shifted and began to knead at the lower back, freeing those muscles from their tense state. Next, Heero moved to Duo's calves. Normally he would have started with Duo's feet, but to do them properly he really needed two hands and with his arm still in the cast, Heero had limited use of his right hand. From calves he moved to thighs, pushing Duo's legs slightly further apart so he could get to the inner thigh muscles as well.

By the time Heero had finished massaging his back, Duo was a pile of melted vet goo on the bed. He felt completely boneless and more relaxed than he had in days. He barely registered Heero shifting, but was reminded that his lover as still there when Heero's hand returned - this time to his buttocks. The firm globes were gently caressed, kneaded and expertly worked by Heero's hand. Those slender fingers worked down to the crease of Duo's buttocks and thighs, stroking softly over the skin before slipping underneath to work over the sensitive perineum.

Duo moaned softly. Despite his relaxed state, his hormones were still wide awake and ready to respond. With the subtle rubbing and teasing of Heero's fingers, Duo's cock began to harden and pretty soon his hips were undulating gently against the sheets, desperate to seek some form of friction for his aching length.

Knowing he was causing these reactions in his lover, Heero smirked to himself and removed his hand from between Duo's legs. "Time to turn over," he said softly.

A soft moan was followed by the movement of limbs as Duo complied, drawing his arms and legs up to push himself to his back. As he lay down again so his hard cock settled against his stomach, a drop of fluid leaking from the tip.

"Hmmm. Looks like you're still a little rigid there," commented Heero as he eyed his boyfriend's impressive length.

"Stiff as a board," replied Duo.
"I think we need to do something about that."

"Feel free. I'm open to any suggestions."

"I don't think the usual massage is going to work," said Heero as he took the thick shaft into his hand and began to stroke the length. "No, this isn't working; it's not relaxing it at all, if anything it's getting harder"

"What do you suggest?"

"I think I'm going to have to try a different sort of massage to get this muscle to soften." Heero scooted back a little, carefully took the head of Duo's cock into his mouth and began to suck gently.

Duo closed his eyes and moaned his appreciation. With his eyes closed he didn't see Heero's hand dip into the oil and disappear.

With Duo distracted, Heero coated his fingers in the oil again and reached between his own legs, sliding the slick fingers along his crevice until he found his hole. Slowly he slid a finger inside and began to prep himself. A second finger was quick to follow, Heero not wanting to waste any time. He'd been waiting a while to have Duo inside him again and now that he had his lover where he wanted him, he was desperate to be filled. A third finger entered his passage, stretching the muscles to protesting point.

"Ah, nice," groaned Duo as Heero's mouth took him deeper. His hands fistd the sheets as he tried to stop himself from thrusting into that hot, wet cavern. Heero's mouth began to slide up and off, the tongue teasing his slit before that delicious mouth left him completely. Duo protested the loss.

"Heero? Why did you stop?" Duo's eyes cracked open and he watched as his lover moved positions again, this time straddling his hips as a hand reached for the oil.

"That massage isn't working either," Heero said with a coy look. "I think I will have to resort to the big guns."

"Big guns?"

"You'll see." Heero poured a generous amount of the oil onto the tip of Duo's erection and then worked the slippery stuff along the shaft, coating the entire length. Satisfied, he moved again, raising himself up and positioning himself over Duo's cock. Duo's hands on his hips stilled him.

"Heero?" Duo's voice was a little concerned.

"It's fine, Duo."

"But, you need to be stretched, I won't hurt you."

"Already taken care of."

Duo reached a hand behind Heero and ran a finger along the crevice of Heero's ass. He felt the slickness of the oil and knew Heero spoke the truth.

"You sly fox," Duo said with a grin, figuring out that Heero had prepped himself whilst attending to Duo's 'problem'.

Heero smirked. "Now, let me see what I can do about massaging this stiffness away."

Duo wrapped his fingers around the base of his penis, holding the organ upright and still so Heero
could lower and impale himself at his own pace.

With half lidded eyes, Heero began to lower himself. Duo's cock head rested against his opening and he paused for a second before lowering himself steadily. The pressure was strong at first, then the muscles gave way, allowing the head to probe inside. Halting again for a moment, Heero stared down at his fey lover. His eyes softened and he smiled. "Love you," he said quietly and began to lower his hips again.

"Love you too," replied Duo, his voice thick with need.

As Duo's cock slid all the way inside, Heero sighed softly. It felt good to be filled again. He took a moment to adjust, letting his inner passage stretch to accommodate his lover's length and savoring the feeling of the hard flesh pressing against his sensitive, inner walls. Feeling he was ready, Heero slowly began to raise himself, aided by Duo's hands on his hips, stopping only when the head remained inside and then lowering himself once more. The feeling was exquisite.

Lying flat on his back with Heero straddling his hips and gently raising and lowering himself, Duo felt all the tension bleed out of him. His body tingled from head to toe, the main area of pleasure being his groin.

"Ride me, Heero. Ride me hard and fast, show me how good you are." Duo's hips began to move, meeting each downward push of Heero with an upward thrust of his own.

"You keep bucking like that and I might have to get the whip and spurs out," Heero purred.

Duo snickered. "No way, Heero. I'm not into that sort of thing."

"Then stop with the bucking. I want to warm you up first, start off slow, loosen those muscles before we move into the harder work."

Duo groaned, Heero's teasing was having a profound effect on him.

Gradually Heero's pace began to increase, taking Duo deeper inside. His hips moved in a steady up and down rhythm, Duo's hands assisting him in his movement. Pleasure began to increase as sleeping nerves were awakened, Heero's passage came alive with sensation as Duo's cock continued to invade him. Duo was moaning softly with each movement of Heero's hips. His sensitive length was gently caressed, squeezed and drawn ever closer to the pinnacle. Muscular walls rippled against his shaft, parting to allow the head of his cock to penetrate and then clinging desperately as he withdrew, reluctant to let him leave.

Heero's moans began to join those of his lover as his pleasure increased. He shifted slightly and was rewarded with a jolt of pure ecstasy when Duo's cock hit his prostate. He groaned and shivered, tingles coursing the length of his body as his blood burned through him. Heero's excitement was building by the second, his climax sat just out of reach and he was unable to gain friction to his cock to bring himself to that peak, needing his one good arm to keep him positioned and riding Duo's cock.

A soft chuckle escaped Duo's lips as he saw the look of frustration in Heero's eyes. He had a pretty good idea of what the problem was, his own orgasm was creeping up on him and it wouldn't be much longer before he lost all sanity. Removing one hand from Heero's hip, he curled his fingers around the stiff length jutting from Heero's groin. "Come for me, baby," Duo said, his tone husky. "Ride me to the finish line." Duo's hand began to squeeze and stroke.

"Ah, oh," moaned Heero. Pleasure began to build to an unbearable level, the heat in his gut
intensified and with one last brush of Duo's cock against his prostate, Heero fell over the edge into climax. Creamy seed spilled from his cock, Duo's hand spreading it along his length as he continued to stroke and give Heero as much pleasure as possible.

Hot, tight walls pressed closer around his shaft. Duo continued to thrust while Heero's movements became jerky and erratic as his climax found him. It became harder and harder to press inside Heero's body as the dark rider's channel spasmed around Duo's cock, heightening Duo's own pleasure. A few moments after Heero's climax had claimed him, so Duo's orgasm hit hard. His body tensed as his balls drew close, Duo's essence spurting from his cock to be buried in Heero's sheath. Wave after wave of pure bliss bathed Duo and he eagerly welcomed it, drowned in it.

Heero rolled himself off and to the side of Duo once he'd managed to regain some form of control over limbs that had turned to jelly. He snuggled up close, breathing in the smell of massage oil, sweat, sex and Duo's own body odor. His eyes closed as he drifted, enjoying the warm, post coital bliss.

A soft sigh of contentment left Duo's lips as he also floated in the euphoria of post orgasmic haze. His body was completely relaxed, every muscle loose and he wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and sleep. He let the feelings of satiation wash though him for a little while longer before getting up and returning to the bathroom to fetch a wash cloth. Once he'd cleaned them both off, Duo snuggled up close to Heero as he drew the covers over their naked forms. He feathered kisses along Heero's cheek before locking lips with his lover.

"Mmm... That was nice, thanks Heero," Duo said as he placed a tender kiss to the tip of Heero's nose. "Not only are you an expert rider, you sure know how to give a mean massage too."

Heero grunted and burrowed deeper into Duo's embrace. "Glad I could relax all of your muscles for you."

"You sure did that," snickered Duo.

"Sleep now, we can go riding again tomorrow," mumbled Heero.

Duo chuckled again and cuddled his lover, sleep claiming them both within minutes.

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Leaving Duo's place behind, Zechs took up Treize's earlier offer to go to the rider's house and relax. He was feeling emotionally fragile right now and in desperate need of some reassurance. He followed the tail lights of Treize's car, his heart heavy. He'd been worried about Treize's reaction to the information he'd given. He'd been worried about Relena's reaction too, but not nearly as much as Treize's. He'd survived without his family for this long and while he hoped there could be some form of reconciliation between Relena and himself, it wouldn't kill him if she chose not to associate with him at all.

But if Treize rejected him as well...

Zechs wasn't sure he could take that.

He'd grown very fond of the ginger haired man. He hesitated to call it love, for he wasn't sure how to love someone again after losing his only love in such tragic circumstances; wasn't sure if he could allow himself to love again. The pain of loss was excruciating and Zechs needed to know Treize really cared for him before he could allow his feelings to come through fully. He couldn't bear to lose someone again.
Treize drove carefully as the evening closed in, headlights picking their way through the dark. His mind was constantly working, part of it concentrating on the road while the rest ran Zechs' tale over and over. His heart bled for the blonde vet, to have suffered through all that and still retain a dignified manner showed Treize just how strong the vet was. He knew it hadn't been easy for Zechs to tell his story, he'd had an inkling that there was something of a skeleton in Zechs' closet but had never pressed for details; he figured if Zechs wanted to tell him, he would. Seems that decision had been made for the man with Relena's silly theatrics.

Pulling up outside the front door of his home, Treize cut the engine and got out, eyes tracking the headlights of Zechs' car as it approached. Right now Treize just wanted to hold his lover, take him in his arms and offer any comfort he could. Zechs' car came to a stop and Treize walked over, meeting the blonde as he exited his car. Taking his boyfriend's hand in his own, Treize didn't speak, words were not necessary. He led them both to the front door and unlocked it, closing it as they stepped inside. Still silent, Treize walked along the passageway and into the lounge room where the artificial fire burned brightly in the grate. He sat Zechs down on the couch and fetched them both a drink; whiskey, neat. He handed Zechs the fine, cut crystal tumbler half full of the amber fluid and took a seat next to him.

Zechs stared at the glass and its contents for a moment before raising it to his lips and taking a mouthful. The alcohol burned all the way to his stomach, the fire spreading through his chilled body and providing much needed warmth. Eyes still fixed on the glass, Zechs began to talk, he felt he owed it to Treize to finish the story he'd begun at Relena's.

"I remained at home for two days after Robin's death; I had to stay, the police had questions. All I wanted to do was get out, get as far away as I could. It ripped me apart when I gave my statement, the lies I had to speak when all I wanted to do was scream the truth. But I couldn't. You know, it's despicable how low people will go to protect their reputations. All Robin's father was worried about was if word got out that Robin had been gay what damage it would do to his political career, not to mention his business. I hated him for that, I hated him for not caring about the kind, loving man his son was, for only thinking of himself."

Zechs took another drink and then continued. "I hated my old man even more, not because of the thrashing he gave me, but for going along with the farce. A young man was dead, a life taken so tragically and all they could think about was covering it up, they didn't seem to care, as long as no one found out Robin was gay..." Zechs felt the emotion begin to build up; years of holding inside all the grief, agony and pain of losing someone dear to him came crashing down. "But above all, I hated myself for being so weak and not standing up and speaking the truth. I'm just as bad and despicable as they were." His breath hitched, moisture formed in his eyes blurring his vision and a soft sob escaped his throat. He felt the glass taken from his fingers, warm arms encircle his shoulders and he let himself fall into the offered embrace.

Treize drew the blonde man to him, wrapping his arms securely around the shaking form and rocking Zechs lightly in his embrace. He ran a soothing hand up and down Zechs' arm, pressed soft kisses to the top of that blonde head and whispered words of comfort. "It's okay, Zechs, it's in the past. No one will hurt you like that again. I'm so sorry, sorry you had to lose someone dear to you, sorry you had to put up with what you did. You didn't deserve that, it wasn't your fault."

Despite the soothing hand, the whispered words of comfort, Zechs couldn't help but feel he'd let Robin down. "I should have said something, I should have stood up to my father, told the police the truth..." The sobs tore from Zechs as the scarred heart he'd thought had healed, opened. The guilt held inside for so long, the hatred and self loathing; all had festered beneath the surface and now burst forth in a poisonous river, flowing freely from the freshly opened wound and there wasn't a damn thing Zechs could do to stop it.
Treize continued to hold his boyfriend, letting him cry out his grief and anguish as his own heart tore inside for the pain his lover had endured. He didn't say anything, just offered his shoulder to cry on, his arms to comfort and his presence as an anchor.

The torrent continued to flow, tears long held back were released and as the dam of grief broke, years of suffering fell like rain from Zechs' eyes. It felt good to finally have the truth out in the open, all the years of carrying the truth hidden inside, unable to speak of it had taken its toll and Zechs couldn't hold back any longer.

Treize didn't know how long they sat there, Zechs sobbing in his arms, and he didn't care either. All he could feel was an overwhelming need to protect and comfort. No one should have suffered through what Zechs had. It made Treize's blood boil to know his boyfriend had been treated with such callous regard, but unfortunately the words Zechs had spoken regarding people being more concerned with their own reputations were only too true. He vowed he would do everything he possibly could to help Zechs get through this. The first hurdle had been cleared, with Zechs having faced and spoken about it, now came the hard part, helping his lover to accept that what had happened had not been his fault. Treize knew all too well how guilt for something out of your control could eat away at you and ultimately destroy a person if they didn't come to terms with it.

Healing would follow.

"I should have done more, I should have insisted on speaking the truth to the police, but instead I took the coward's way out. Oh, god. Robin... Can you ever forgive me?" The words were choked out

"He already has," soothed Treize.

"How? How can you say that?" Zechs hiccupped. "I let him die, I let them say it was some stupid accident when it wasn't." Zechs desperately wanted to believe what Treize said was true.

"He's forgiven you. He knows it wasn't your fault, he knew how things worked and he wants you to be happy. That's why he brought you to me. He knew you needed to let go of all this guilt and grief. He doesn't blame you for what happened. I know I never met the man, and yet with what you have said about him I can honestly say he wouldn't be the type to want you to grieve for him, to blame yourself. In fact he would want the opposite, he'd want you to go on with your life, to be happy, find someone else and continue to live and love, that way his death has not been in vain."

Zechs looked up through watery, red rimmed eyes into the soft blue of his boyfriend's eyes. The words Treize spoke gave him a small glimmer of hope and he latched onto them. "Why are you so wise?"

Treize smiled and tenderly stroked the bangs out of Zechs' eyes. "Not wise, my love, just practical. I know if it had been me and not Robin, I would have wanted you to go on living. You see, by continuing to live and love you are keeping his memory alive, you are showing all of those out there who knew the dark truth that you haven't forgotten, that you will uphold all you and he believed in. You didn't fail him, if anything you are honoring him by continuing to love." Treize leaned in to steal a soft kiss. "And I'm humbled that you chose me to share that love with."

A fresh bout of tears fell from Zechs' eyes. The words Treize spoke rang true, breaking through the barriers of guilt and self loathing, wiping them away and replacing them with something more; hope.

Treize continued to hold Zechs, knowing the tears would help to cleanse the other man's soul, wash away the hatred. Once Zechs let go of the past he could start to build a proper future, a future Treize hoped he could be a part of.
Several more minutes passed and finally the tears began to slow and stop. Sniffles replaced the sobbing as Zechs slumped into his boyfriend's arms, completely drained.

"Feel better now?" asked Treize as he managed to pull a handkerchief from his pocket and pass it to the blonde.

"Yes, thank you." Zechs took the handkerchief, wiped his face and blew his nose. "I'm sorry about that," he said in a hoarse voice.

"No need to apologize, you needed to get it out of your system and I'm pleased I could be here for you to help you." Treize began to feather kisses over the tear streaked face.

"You must think I'm an awful sissy, breaking down like that."

Treize moved, startling the blonde as he shifted and placed a hand on each of Zechs' cheeks. He cupped the vet's face and stared deep into ice blue. "No! Let's get one thing straight here, Zechs. You never have been nor ever will be a sissy. You are an exceptional man; kind, forgiving, gentle, patient and more talented than anyone I know. Don't belittle yourself. I'm surprised you haven't broken down before or gone mad with all that bottled up inside. No, you're one beautiful person, Zechs Merquise, and I hope you continue to share yourself with me for I want no-one else but you."

Zechs felt the emotion welling inside again, rather than break into fresh tears, Zechs claimed Treize's lips in a harsh kiss, one that spoke of how desperate and thankful he was for the understanding.

The kisses soon grew deeper and more intense. Treize needing to show the vet how much he cared for him. Zechs responded, wanting to feel cared for and not condemned. The kisses continued to intensify, tongues began to roam as each man let himself be consumed by the desire of the moment, the need to reassure and be reassured. Treize shifted positions again, drawing Zechs closer to him. His hands began to wander over the hard planes of the vet's back, caressing the warm skin beneath the fabric of the shirt.

"Treize... please," moaned Zechs. His body began to heat up as desire flared in his groin. The feeling of Treize against him, the tender touches gifted to his body, the kisses that worshiped his mouth, all driving his need to greater heights. He wanted, no needed to be loved.

Reluctantly pulling away, Treize understood what Zechs was asking for and began to rise from the couch. He kept hold of Zechs' hand, pulling the other man to his feet where he kissed him and then led him out of the lounge and along the passage to his bedroom. Entering the bedroom, Treize kissed Zechs again, nipping lightly at the vet's bottom lip as he pulled back a bit and locked gazes, the unspoken question passed between them and Zechs nodded.

Clothes became history, creamy skin exposed to sight and touch. Fingers caressed, touched and teased, encouraging nerves to come alive and experience pure pleasure. Silvery blonde hair lay fanned across the bed covers, framing the man lying on it and giving him the appearance of a god, a god Treize wanted to worship to the fullest. He paused in his ministrations to gaze upon Zechs in all his glory.

Rich, creamy skin glowed with the flush of arousal, muscle groups stood out, twitching in reaction to the scrutiny. Slender, long legs, parted to allow Treize to sink between them and that glorious manhood stood tall and erect, crowned by a thick, golden patch of wiry hair. Treize allowed himself the luxury of gently running his fingers along the elegant shaft, smiling as the organ jerked and tried to follow the touch. His hand crept lower to cup the heavy balls and roll them softly.

Zechs' eyes weren't exactly still. They perused the body of the man before him. Treize was slender
but muscular, especially in the thighs, something that came from spending years in the saddle. The upper body was well toned, strong shoulders and broad chest with a dusting of fine hair over it. Zechs dropped his eyes to the juncture of those muscular thighs and took in the sight of his lover.

Dark hair accented the groin, Treize's cock rising from the thatch with an almost regal stance. Long and thick, the flared head leaking a little and pulsing with need. Beneath, Treize's balls hung, covered in a fine, downy hair and begging to be played with. Zechs couldn't resist and slipped a hand underneath his lover to trace patterns over the soft skin of Treize's sac, drawing moans of pure need from the rider's mouth.

They tormented and teased each other for a while before a slick finger began to penetrate, swirling around a pink entrance and easing inside. A second and then third followed, stretching muscles and preparing the tight heat. A groan issued from Zechs' mouth as Treize found his prostate, whimpers and upward thrusts of his pelvis followed.

Lube was slicked along the thick shaft, slender legs raised and spread, offering the prepared pucker. Treize took his time entering, sliding in a little and then withdrawing, easing forth again and then retreating, teasing himself just as much as his blonde lover as he slowly but steadily impaled the vet on his cock. It took all of Treize's self control to stop and give his lover time to adjust to the invasion. His eyes closed as the heat and tightness of Zechs' channel surrounded him, almost driving him mad with the need to move.

"Ah, good, so good," murmured Zechs. "More, I need more."

Slowly, Treize eased himself out, sliding back until only the head remained inside and then he plunged back in. The heated passage gripped him tightly, hugging around his shaft and bathing him with moist heat. He moved steadily, rocking his hips and finding his rhythm, driving them both to insanity with his slow, methodical thrusts.

The pace was gentle and yet deep, burning to the very core of Zechs' heart and soul. There was no need to rush, they had all the time in the world and Zechs let himself go. Pleasure began to build, searing both of them with its intensity, soft kisses were gifted while each gave and took from the other, their bodies dancing together in perfect harmony. The slow torture increased, each man being driven higher and higher until it was simply a matter of time before they fell over the edge and into oblivion.

Treize was the first to surrender to the passion, body going rigid as his seed pulsed from inside. Zechs followed almost immediately, his cock delivering his essence in thick spurts, coating bellies and dripping to the sheets below. Treize continued to thrust lazily for a little while longer, enjoying the ripples of Zechs' passage along his sensitive length that had begun to soften. As the orgasmic high began to fade, Treize allowed himself to slip from inside that sweet passage and shift to lie beside his sated lover. Immediately Zechs turned and cuddled into him, not wanting to lose contact with the warm body of his lover.

Wrapping his arms around the vet, Treize drew the man close, his fingers trailing along the creamy skin of Zechs' back. "Are you all right? I didn't hurt you?"

Zechs nuzzled his lover's chest. "I'm fine, you didn't hurt me; in fact, that was just what the doctor ordered."

"Oh, was it?" Treize mused.

"Yeah."
They lay together in silence for a while longer before Zechs began to move.
"Where are you going?" asked Treize, his voice a little thick with sleep. He'd begun to doze off.
"I should get going. We both have work tomorrow." Zechs stopped when he felt a hand wrap around his wrist. He turned back to the man on the bed.
"Stay?"
Zechs closed his eyes for a moment and then sighed. He really didn't want to be alone tonight. He was tired, emotionally drained and wanted nothing more than to forget the entire day had happened.
"Please stay?" Treize repeated the words.
Opening his eyes, Zechs looked into the sincere, blue eyes of the rider. "Okay."
Treize smiled and then got up off the bed. He pulled the covers back and motioned for Zechs to climb back into bed. The blonde did and Treize crawled back in himself, pulling the covers over them both and then sweeping Zechs into his arms. He pressed a kiss to the other man's lips. "Good night," he whispered. "Trust me, it will all look better in the morning."
Zechs couldn't help it, his lips quirked into a small smile. "I hope so," he murmured and lay his head on Treize's chest.
Both were quick to fall asleep.
* * *
Dorothy returned to the sitting room after seeing their guests out. Gathering up the used china, she glanced from time to time at her mistress. Relena was locked in thought. Putting everything back on the tray, Dorothy took a seat for a moment. "Miss Relena? Are you all right?"
At the sound of Dorothy's voice, Relena's head jerked up. She'd been so lost in her thoughts she'd forgotten about Dorothy. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"
"I asked if you were all right."
Relena frowned. "I, I don't know," she replied honestly. "This is all just a bit of a shock. I'm not sure what to think."
Dorothy stood and walked over to the couch, placing a hand on her mistress' shoulder. "I'll go make some fresh tea. Once I come back we can talk about all this, if you like?"
Relena raised a hand and covered Dorothy's with it. "Thank you, Dorothy. Right now I'm a bit confused, there's so many thoughts whirling around inside that I can't seem to think straight."
"I think it will help you to sort things out if you do talk about it. I'll go get a fresh pot of tea and then we can talk all you want to."
Relena watched as the housekeeper turned, picked up the tray and went out to the kitchen to make a fresh brew. She really did have a lot to think on and maybe discussing things with Dorothy would help her to straighten out her mind. The one thought that kept coming back time and time again was how could her mother have kept all this from her?
Dorothy set the kettle to boil and placed a fresh lot of tea leaves into the china teapot. While she waited for the tea to steep, she fetched the bottle of cooking brandy from the cupboard and poured
herself a glass. Having swallowed the amber fluid and setting the glass in the sink, she smiled wryly. Treize was right; the taste buds didn’t know it was imitation.

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Chapter 39

The tea brewed and Dorothy set the teapot on the tray, carrying it back through to the sitting room. Pouring Relena a cup she passed it to the silent woman and then checked the fire. Another log was added, sparks flying in protest before Dorothy returned to her seat and poured her own cup of tea. She watched her mistress carefully, noting the slight frown still on the face as the woman obviously tossed all the information around in her head.

"Would you like something to eat?" Dorothy asked, noting with a jolt that it was later in the evening than she’d thought and neither one of them had eaten anything since lunchtime.

"I'm not hungry," replied Relena.

Dorothy wasn't surprised, she wasn't hungry either. Seemed that Doctor Merquise's story had killed their appetites as well.

"This is all so..." Relena began to talk and then stopped.

"I know it's a lot to take in right now," said Dorothy quietly.

"I just don't know where to start, where to begin sifting through it all."

"Why not start at the beginning?" offered Dorothy.

"Easy for you to say, I don't even know where the beginning is!"

The two women sat in silence again for a few moments before Relena spoke again.

"How could my mother have kept this all to herself? She never even hinted that she had a brother."

"Relena? What was your grandfather like?"

Relena thought on that for a moment. "He, he was a very strict man, strong willed and outspoken in his beliefs. He didn't tolerate anything from anyone." Relena began to lose herself in her memories, thinking back over the years to the times she had spent with her grandfather, to when her mother had been alive.

"He was a very domineering man, used to being obeyed, I guess. I can remember visiting him when I was little. I was so scared to move, to touch anything in case I broke something or made him mad at me. He wasn't what you would call your usual grandfather."

"How so?" Dorothy asked. She had a feeling that if Relena could lose herself in her memories they might find the reason behind her hatred for gay people. Dorothy was pretty sure she already knew, but Relena needed to discover it for herself.

"I remember other kids and their grandparents, they would laugh and play, share games, hugs and stories with their grandparents. Mine didn't do any of that. I can still recall the first time I tried to hug my grandfather. He growled at me, pushed me away and gave me a stern look. He told me that it wasn't right or proper for people to hug like that. People shouldn't show affection towards each other. When grandma died he didn't seem to care. He sat through the funeral and didn't bat an eyelid. I remember my mother crying and him telling her not to be so weak, something about only pansies and
sissies cried; strong, normal people didn't. I didn't understand how he could be so heartless."

Dorothy topped up the tea.

"It was not long after my grandmother died that my mother seemed to change. She became withdrawn and I would often catch her staring out the window at nothing in particular. When I'd ask her if she was okay she would always smile and nod. My dad tried to help her but he didn't know what was wrong either. I guess we both thought it was the loss of grandma that had hit her hard. I'd always notice though that when grandfather called around for a visit she would always be sadder when he'd gone. I couldn't figure out why when grandfather was always so cruel and sarcastic towards her with his words." Relena paused and frowned, something tugged at the back of her mind.

"Miss Relena?"

"I'm okay. I, I remember something." Relena thought again, searching her mind and willing the memory to come forth.

It did.

"I remember, I was about eight and grandfather had come to visit. Mother was sitting with him in the drawing room, dad was outside in the stables and I was supposed to be doing my homework in my bedroom. I came down to get a glass of water and as I passed the drawing room I couldn't help but overhear the words being spoken." Relena screwed up her face as she fought to recall the memory. "Grandfather, he was ranting on at my mother. I can't remember everything that was said, just something about a freak, Milliardo and an abhorrence against God. I didn't understand what was going on and I knew if I got caught eavesdropping I'd get a hiding so I took off back to my room. I didn't think about it any more."

Relena placed her empty tea cup on the coffee table.

"Do you have any idea why you are so opposed to two people of the same sex loving each other, Relena?" Dorothy gently posed the question.

Relena frowned as she thought on Dorothy's words. "It isn't right," she said softly.

"Why isn't it right?"

"It goes against everything society says." Relena went quiet for a moment and then began to speak again. "I used to go to church and I can remember the minister giving his sermon this one time. He was so strong and intimidating. He went on about Adam and Eve, the sins of the flesh and something about same sex couples being damned to hell for eternity." Relena shuddered. "My grandfather came back home with us after the service and had morning tea. I recall him carrying on about the minister's sermon. I remember my mother being very quiet, even my dad didn't say much. After that he would always find some way to bring up the subject that homosexuality was wrong and perverted, it would only lead to living in the fires of hell. Oh, Dorothy," Relena's eyes watered as she began to understand. "All that time he was carrying on about my uncle, wasn't he?"

"I'd say he was, Miss Relena. That's what it looks like to me," replied Dorothy softly.

"No wonder my mother was so sad. I wonder what he told her, how he explained the leaving of her brother?"

"I don't know the answer to that, Relena."

"I need to talk to him, there's so much more to this that I don't know."
"I'm sure he will be willing to talk to you and explain more if you call him."

"Dorothy?"

"Yes?"

"It isn't like that at all, is it?"

"What isn't?"

"What my grandfather said, what he convinced me of all those years ago. People that love someone of the same sex, they aren't condemned to live in hell."

"No, Relena. I think if you were to look deeper into the church and its teachings you will find that there is the mention of homosexuality in there. I don't fully know myself, but I'm sure you will find that the church doesn't condone nor condemn same sex couples. If this God is supposed to be as kind, merciful and forgiving as he's preached to be, then he would welcome true love between people, regardless of their sex."

"I think I see what you're trying to say."

Dorothy wasn't too sure she understood herself what she'd just said, but if it gave Relena something positive to think about then she wasn't going to question it.

"I'm tired, I think I'll go to bed. Dorothy?"

"Yes?"

"Would you contact Doctor Merquise in the morning for me and ask him if he can spare the time to call around and talk with me tomorrow? I have a lot of questions for him."

"I'll call first thing."

"Thank you."

* * *

Duo whistled to himself as he strolled down to the stable block, Heero was already putting the horses out and feeding them, having beaten Duo out of bed by half an hour. The braided vet wandered into the stables and headed straight for Peacemillion's stable. He smiled as he looked over the half door. The stallion was looking a lot brighter than he had yesterday. Leaving the stable for the moment, Duo stepped into the small dispensary and fetched his stethoscope.

"How is he?" asked Heero as he returned with the empty feed buckets.

"Temperature is still slightly elevated but his heart rate and breathing are normal. His color is good too. Do you think you could hold him for me for a moment while I give him a shot of penicillin and a painkiller, please?"

"Sure."

Duo fetched the required drugs from the dispensary and returned to the stable where Heero was holding the stallion. He swabbed a spot on the gray's rump and quickly injected the drugs, swabbing again after he'd removed the needle. "There, all done. Thanks, Heero."

"No problem," replied Heero and then went to check the horse's feed bin. "He ate all his dinner."
"Good." Duo checked the water bucket, pleased to note it was half empty. "I'll clean his stable out as I want to check his manure," Duo said as the pair exited the stable.

"Would you like me to make him up another bran mash?"

"If you don't mind. I think he'd be better off on the lighter stuff for now, we can try him on a more solid feed base tomorrow, if all continues well with him."

"Okay." Heero disappeared into the feed shed to make up the mash while Duo fetched the poop scoop and proceeded to clean out the stallion's stable.

Duo had just finished when the sound of tires on the gravel driveway reached his ears. Putting down the bucket and scoop, Duo went out to see who the visitor was at such an early hour.

"Zechs. Good morning to you."

Zechs stepped out of his car and smiled at the other vet. "Morning, Duo. How is the patient today?"

"Doing well. Come and take a look for yourself." Duo led the other vet inside the stables, explaining what treatment he'd performed that morning.

Leaning over the stable door, Zechs gave a sigh of relief. The horse was certainly a lot different to what he'd been the previous day. There was still a long way to go with the healing and recovery process, but so far everything was pointing to a complete recovery.

"I thought it would be best to keep him on the bran mash for today. Tomorrow we can try him on something a little more solid."

"Good idea," replied Zechs.

"I've just finished cleaning out his stable and was going to check his manure."

"Right. I'd like to take a look myself." Zechs followed Duo as the other vet picked up the bucket and carried it outside where they could see better.

Heero emerged from the feed shed with the bran mash in a bucket. He watched the pair exiting with the manure bucket and smiled to himself. He shook his head as he entered Peacemillion's stable and put the feed into the feed bin. It never ceased to tickle him that Duo, and now Zechs too it appeared, seemed to get all excited over a pile of shit.

The two vets went through the manure, happy with what they found. "Looks like the reattachment was successful," said Duo as he poked some of the manure.

"I'd say so," replied Zechs. There wasn't any trace of blood or hard lumps in the manure which was a good sign. "I'd like to take a sample and have a look under the microscope to be completely sure that there's nothing in there that shouldn't be."

"I've got one up at the surgery if you want to use it."

"Thanks for the offer but I think I'll pass. I'll take a sample back to Oakford with me and do it there as I'm going to be late as it is." Zechs looked at his watch.

"No problem. I'll pop some in a container for you."

"Thanks."
Zechs left a few minutes later, sample in a small jar beside him.

* * *

"Morning, Doctor Merquise."

"Morning, Zoe," replied Zechs as he entered the surgery at Oakford. "Sorry I'm a little late, I stopped off to check on that colic case I had yesterday."

"I thought you might have. Doctor Alves was asking if you were in yet and that's what I told him."

"Thanks."

"How is the horse?"

"Doing very well. I've got a sample here I want to check so I'll be in the equipment room. Do I have any cases yet this morning?"

"No, nothing has come in yet. You do have a suture removal this afternoon. Oh, there was a call for you too, a Miss Catalonia."

Zechs raised an eyebrow, the name wasn't familiar to him.

"She asked if you could call back. She said she was inquiring about the horse you operated on yesterday." Zoe passed over a piece of paper with the details on it.

"Thanks. I'll go check this sample and then I'll call back and find out what she wants." Zechs turned and headed for the equipment room and the microscope. Once done with his inspections of the microscopic world, Zechs returned to the reception area and fetched the file out on Peacemillion. He entered in the latest data that Duo had given him as well as his findings from the microscope. Once all was up-to-date, he replaced the file and went through to the small staff room and made himself a coffee. Picking up the 'phone, he dialed the number Zoe had given him.

Five minutes later, Zechs replaced the 'phone and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

* * *

The day passed fairly quickly for Zechs and at the end of his shift he was heading for the Peacecraft stud to talk with Relena a little more. Part of him was anxious about the meeting and another part of him held a small amount of hope. If Relena wanted to talk further then maybe, just maybe, he would get back part of the family he'd lost.

The cell phone rang and Zechs pushed the small 'talk' button on the hands free set. "Merquise."

"Zechs, it's Treize."

Zechs felt himself warm at the sound of his lover's voice. "Hey," he said softly.

"I'm sorry I haven't called sooner, I didn't want to disturb you at work. How are you?"

"I'm fine." Zechs continued to converse, answering Treize's questions about Peacemillion before the subject changed to the previous evening. Zechs was touched at his boyfriend's concern and happily talked with him for a few more minutes, assuring the other man that he had more than enjoyed himself.

"I know this is short notice and all, but would you like to go out for dinner tonight?"
"Treize, I'd love to, but right now I'm on my way to Relena's and I don't know how long I will be."

"That's okay. Maybe a rain check?"

"For sure."

"May I ask why you're going to Relena's?"

"She wants to talk to me some more regarding my past."

"Would you...? Did you want me to come with you?"

"Thanks for the offer, Treize, but I think I'd be better going alone this time. I appreciate the thought though."

"No problem. Care to call in after?"

"I'll see how late it is when I finish."

"Okay."

A few more words were exchanged and then the call was cut. Zechs found himself pulling into the driveway of the Peacecraft stud. He exited the car and was met at the front door by Dorothy who escorted him to the lounge room where Relena sat in an overstuffed chair, eyes focused on the fire crackling in the grate.

"Can I get you anything to drink, Doctor Merquise?"

"No, thank you, Dorothy."

"I'll leave you to it then." Dorothy exited, closing the door behind her.

Once they were alone, Relena looked up at the tall vet, now her uncle as well. "Thank you for coming back, Doctor Merquise."

"My pleasure. Please, call me Zechs." Zechs took a seat as indicated by Relena and waited for the woman to speak.

Relena ordered her thoughts and then began to talk. Explaining a little of what she'd remembered of her younger days and family, she began to question the vet. "Obviously there is a large part of this story missing and before I can fully understand what happened in my youth and the results of such happenings, I need for you to try and fill in some of the gaps. I'll also explain a little more of what happened in my life when I was younger, I'm sure you are curious to know."

Zechs nodded. He could accommodate that request. Taking a deep breath he fixed his niece with his gaze. "You already know why I was banished from the family, but there is more to it than that."

Zechs stared out the window as his mind rolled back the years.

"Once the inquiry was over I left. I packed everything I owned and could stuff into a couple of duffle bags and cleared out. I was just shy of eighteen, homeless and unwanted, but I did have one thing on my side. With my good grades the acceptance into veterinary college had come with a full scholarship. I left town and hitchhiked to the city. The first thing I did when I got there was to change my name. I didn't want to be associated with my father and getting rid of the name was the first step."

"I can understand that," said Relena softly.
"Oh?"

"I did a similar thing myself, but I can explain that later. Please, continue."

"My original name was Milliardo Peacecraft, I changed it to Zechs Merquise. Robin's middle name was Zechs, I felt it would keep his memory with me to take his name as such. Anyway, I moved into the dorms at the vet college, produced the paperwork to confirm my scholarship and name change and I was in. I picked up a few part time jobs over the years to pay for my room and food at the college. It wasn't easy trying to combine studies and work, but I didn't have anything else to do with my life so I threw myself into the course; it was a way to forget the past, help with trying to get over the grief in my heart. You see, Relena, the day Robin died, Milliardo Peacecraft also died."

Zechs paused for a moment to see how the woman was taking all this. She was listening intently, no emotion showing on her face. Zechs continued.

"As much as it hurt to think of my father and what he'd done, I also needed to keep tabs on the family for my own sanity. It's not easy to erase eighteen years of your life and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't do it. I didn't give a damn about the old man; he could rot in hell as far as I was concerned. No, I needed to know that your mother was okay. Alice and I were fairly close, we shared a lot of our thoughts and plans for the future together, after I was disowned I had to know that she was okay, for my own sake. Tell me, Relena. Did your mother ever speak of her younger days? Did she tell you how she met your father? Talk to you about their courtship and then marriage?"

Relena looked a little puzzled. "No, not really. I know she met dad through the stables and that they had a whirlwind romance and then got married. They had me about a year later."

Zechs gave a sad smile. "Relena, I hate to say this, but only part of that is true."

"What do you mean?" Relena's eyes narrowed.

"Look. I don't want to shatter any illusions for you, but you need to know the truth."

Relena felt as if she had been caught in a spider's web, her entire life nothing but silken strands that were being steadily snapped with each word her uncle spoke. As painful as it was, she wanted to know the truth. Since finding out about her uncle, she somehow instinctively knew that there was a whole lot more to her past that she didn't know and he was her only tie to that past, her grandparents and parents all dead. As painful as she sensed this was going to be, and not only for her, she had to know. "Please, tell me," she murmured quietly.

"Relena, before I do, I want you to know that what I am about to say is the truth. I have no reason to lie to you, the truth will not benefit me in any way, shape, form or matter. I have no interest in reclaiming the Peacecraft name, and I certainly do not intend to challenge your right to the Peacecraft inheritance."

"I didn't think for a moment that you would stand to gain anything from this," replied Relena. "If I'd thought that I wouldn't have asked you to come here and explain to me your claims. No, this is a part of me, my history, and I think I have a right to know. As you are my only living relative I will have to trust that what you're about to tell me is the truth."

Zechs nodded. "You may want Dorothy back in here when I say what I have to. I think it is going to come as a shock to you and you might find her support needed."

"Okay." Relena rang the small bell and Dorothy appeared. Relena gave her a brief outline of what was going on and Dorothy agreed to stay. Truth be told, Dorothy was quite eager to find out the past
that Zechs spoke of and while she'd known that her mistress would confide in her sooner or later, it was nice to be trusted to hear it from the source.

Once everyone was comfortable again, Zechs continued his story...

"I'd been gone for about six months and during that time I'd kept an eye on the newspapers and contacted a friend of mine back home who kept me up-to-date with what was going on with the family. He told me that Alice had begun to rebel against my father once I'd left, whether in protest at my being banished or because of what they told her, I really don't know. I tried to contact her a couple of times but she didn't want anything to do with me. I almost gave up until one day, I'd passed my first year exams with honors and wanted to tell someone the good news. I tried again to contact your mother, knowing she would probably reject me again, and she did. That's when I decided I'd never try again. About two weeks later my friend wrote to me to let me know my sister was getting married. I found it to be quite a shock to say the least. She had only just turned seventeen, my nineteenth birthday was a few weeks away. I immediately wrote back to my friend and asked him for the details. He wrote back and told me all he knew."

"By the time I had the information I needed, the wedding had taken place and your mother and her new husband had settled down to married life on their own property. Four months later, you were born."

Relena's head jerked up. "Four months after their wedding?" she whispered softly, her skin paling.

"Yes, Relena. I managed to contact your father, at first he didn't want to speak to me either, but I managed to persuade him to meet with me. He did and we had a long talk. I won't go into all the details, but he told me, my father had told your mother that I had killed Robin and to save me from being arrested and charged, they had covered it up by saying it was an accident and then sent me away. They spun some story about how I was jealous of Robin. Your mother had liked Robin too and so she found it hard to accept that I could have done something so horrible, that's why she didn't want to speak with me any longer. She rebelled in a sense, feeling Robin's death just as much as I did and she turned to your father for comfort."

Relena could sense what was coming next and she wasn't sure if she wanted to hear it or not. Dorothy moved a little closer and took her mistress' hand in her own to offer some comfort.

"John's father was into racehorses and kept a couple at my father's stables. Alice met him and instantly fell in love. John was everything that dad didn't approve of. He was handsome, rough and a bit of a playboy. He knew he was good looking and he always had a string of girls after him. Alice soon joined that string. Your father started to date my sister and from what John told me they enjoyed a night of passion together. From there the relationship blossomed. At first I think John was only interested in how he could better himself, being with a Peacecraft daughter pushed his standing in the horse world up rather a lot. But then Alice discovered she was pregnant."

Relena's hand flew to her mouth, all her dreams shattered before her eyes. Dorothy wrapped an arm around the young woman's shoulders.

"Once my father found out you can imagine what happened. Before they knew it, Alice and John were married, settled into their own place and then you were born. At first they seemed to be very happy, John's father helped him out setting up the stud and things went from strength to strength. My father couldn't accept that though. He was very bitter towards John for humiliating him and never passed up an opportunity to have a dig at him."

Relena nodded her head. "I always knew there was something rotten between my father and grandfather, but I didn't know what. I guess that answers that question."
Zechs gave a soft smile. "I appreciate this isn't easy for you to hear, Relena; and I'm afraid it gets worse."

"It does?" Relena swallowed hard.

"Tell me, Relena. What do you remember or know of your mother and father's passing?"

"I, I don't remember a whole lot about mother, just that she was really sick. She caught some disease or something." Relena's voice began to hitch with emotion as she thought about her dead mother.

"And what of your father?"

"He, he had an accident."

"Relena, most of that is true, but there's a reason behind your mother's death."

"What do you mean? How could you know all this if you were ostracized? You said yourself my mother wouldn't have anything to do with you after Robin's death. I can't see my father associating with you either under the circumstances."

Zechs sighed. "True, your mother didn't have anything to do with me and neither did John. I only met up with him twice, after that he didn't contact me again and I didn't contact him."

"Then how? You're making all this up, I know it."

"Relena. I swear to you this is all true. I had a private detective follow your family. By this stage I was in the last parts of my internship and the money was pretty good. I could afford a private eye and employed one just to keep me informed of what was going on."

"You were spying on us?!"

"No." Zechs rubbed a weary hand over his face. "Please, let me finish. Then if you wish to toss me out and never hear from me again I'll respect that decision."

Relena didn't look at all happy but she was curious as to what else her uncle had to say so she dropped it for the moment. "Fine. Continue."

"John's father died and of course John inherited quite a substantial sum of money. Not long after my father also passed away and Alice inherited a small fortune. They invested the money in a large property; this property. John was going from strength to strength in the racing game, as you know, he was breeding and racing some top stock."

"Yes, I know that. I used to help him out with the breeding side."

"With the success of the stud, your father began to travel, searching for new bloodstock to bring in. With his constant trips away and involvement in the racing game your parents began to grow apart. You would have been around eight or nine, I think."

Relena cast her mind back and could vaguely remember her parents having arguments. She'd never taken much notice though as they always tried to keep their arguments away from her and she'd only stumbled across them exchanging heated words on a couple of occasions.

"Relena, what I'm about to tell you, you aren't going to like, but I swear it's the truth. One night, your mother came home early from a bridge club she went to each week. She hadn't been feeling too well and decided to leave early. When she got home she found your father in bed..."
Relena's eyes widened.

"...with another man."

The room swam for a moment as Relena desperately fought the rising nausea. *Her father, in bed, with another man?* "No! No, it's not true!"

"I'm sorry, Relena, but it is. I have proof, but I'd rather not show you that if I don't have to."

"But..."

"Your mother went hysterical. Several heated words were exchanged and she stormed out of the house. John went after her but it took him several hours before he found her and when he did she was half out of her mind with rage. She was also soaking wet. He brought her home and put her to bed, calling the doctor as soon as he could. To cut the long story short, she caught the 'flu which became pneumonia. She did recover to a point but not fully. Her world was shattered, she'd been betrayed by her husband; for another man, no less, and she couldn't find it in her heart to talk to him about it, let alone think about forgiving him. He tried to explain to her, but she wouldn't listen."

A piece of a jigsaw fell into place in Relena's head. "So that's why..."

"What, Relena?" Dorothy asked.

"My mother, she always spoke about homosexuals as being the scum of the earth, nothing but weak minded sissies that didn't deserve to live. I didn't really understand what she meant at the time, but now it makes sense."

"It would also explain your hatred of gay people," Zechs said softly.

"After my mother - passed away," Relena took a breath. "My father, he didn't socialize much, he never brought home any other women. I always thought it was because he missed my mother. Now that I think about it, he did always have a few male friends around. Oh god!" Relena felt the room spin again.

"As much as it pains me to say it, Relena. Your father was a homosexual."

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Chapter 40

"As much as it pains me to say it, Relena. Your father was a homosexual."

Relena felt as if all the air in the room had been sucked out. She blanched as the thought of her own father being gay hit her and hit her hard. Suddenly all the venomous words her mother had spoken about gay people, along with her grandfather's snide comments came spilling through her mind. It was too much for her to take in and she felt the room begin to spin.

As Relena fainted, Dorothy managed to prevent her from hitting the floor. With Zechs' assistance they lay Relena on the couch, elevated her feet and waited for the woman to come around.

"Is she going to be all right?" Zechs asked nervously.

"She will. I must say though, you do have a talent for making the ladies faint," replied Dorothy with a quirk to her lips.

Zechs blushed.

"Tell me one thing, Doctor Merquise. Do you have any more bombshells to drop?"

"Eh?"

"Just so I know whether or not to call the doctor or if the smelling salts will be enough."

Zechs shook his head, a smile on his lips. "No, I don't really have much more to add."

"Thank goodness for that. I don't think I can take much more of this, let alone Relena."

On the couch, Relena began to stir, Dorothy was quick to her side. "Miss Relena? Are you okay?"

Relena's eyes blinked open. "I fainted again, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, but I'm not surprised," replied Dorothy. "Just lie there for a little longer, you've had quite a shock."

As Relena lay there so all of her uncle's words came rushing back. She turned to see the vet sitting opposite. "How, how can you be so sure? My father never showed any tendencies towards men that I can recall. I know he had a lot of male friends, but they were just business acquaintances."

Zechs lowered his head, hiding his eyes. "Besides the private detective I hired, the man your mother caught your father in bed with was a friend of mine."

Relena felt as if she was going to be sick. "Then my life, everything I was brought up to believe, all I've been told is nothing but a lie; a life full of lies and hypocrites."

"Relena, your parents loved you very much."

"How can I believe that? My father, the man I... " Relena paused, choking on the words.

"I know you adored your father, Relena. He was a fine man with excellent business skills and a knack for breeding the best racehorses around. You have inherited that from him. Before you
condemn him, think back, Relena. Think back over your childhood. Did he ever harm you? Did he ever give you reason to doubt he cared for you, would do anything to make you happy? Don't you think he deserved some happiness too? Your mother was partly to blame for him seeking comfort elsewhere. You see, she deliberately got herself pregnant with you to escape my father's controlling ways. She trapped your father into a marriage he didn't want. Your father was a lot more honorable that you give him credit for. He did the right thing and gave you a father and a home life. Homosexuals were just as scorned then as they are now and like most gay men, he covered up his preferences by flirting with women. He didn't realize he would be trapped by one. As much as I loved my sister, she did the wrong thing there and caused a lot of pain and grief for many people."

Slowly the light began to dawn in Relena's eyes as she tossed around the information. Her mother had deliberately gotten pregnant and forced her father to marry her. Her father had done the right thing, forsaking his own chances at happiness to provide her with a loving home life and parents who cared. She winced inwardly as she thought about the number of times she'd spoken harshly about homosexuals in front of her father, how much pain she must have caused him, and yet he never once showed anything other than love for her.

"Relena?"

Relena looked up.

"I think I should leave now. You have all the facts and a lot to come to terms with. I'm truly sorry you had to find all this out this way. Please forgive me for being the one to bring you such painful memories and telling you what you needed to know. I couldn't stand back though and see you continue to live your life this way, hurting yourself and possibly damaging other people in the process; it isn't right. I quite understand if you don't want to see me or associate with me again."

Relena gave a shaky smile and held out her hand. "Yes, I do have a lot to come to terms with, you're right about that. As much as I wish this wasn't true, I believe you and I thank you for coming here and enlightening me. I would be lying if I were to say it hasn't affected me, for it has. Right now I have many emotions to sort through, but," Relena opened her arms, "you're my blood relative and I do realize how much it must have pained you to tell me this; the horrors it has dragged up for you. Thank you for baring your soul to me. You are my uncle and I hope we can get to know each other better over the years."

Zechs stepped forward and embraced his niece. "Thank you for not rejecting me."

"Uncle Zechs, you will always be welcome in my home."

’Uncle Zechs.’ How he had longed to hear those words and now that they had been spoken he felt his heart lighten and a load slip from his weary shoulders. He smiled. "Take care, Relena. I'll be in touch."

Dorothy saw Zechs out and then returned to the lounge room and her mistress. Her mind was also going a mile a minute, realizing just what a large step Relena had taken in accepting Zechs as her uncle and no doubt her mistress would want to talk to someone. Hopefully this would be the first small step of many her mistress would take in getting her life sorted out. She stepped inside the lounge room and glanced at Relena. "Miss Relena?"

Relena looked up at Dorothy. "Yes?"

"Now that you know the truth, what are you going to do?" Dorothy couldn't begin to contemplate how her mistress must be feeling, but she knew Relena would need a guiding hand to sort through all of this and not make the same mistakes her parents had.
"I don't really know what I'm going to do. It's not every day you find out that your father, the man you loved wasn't what he seemed to be; in fact, he was everything you'd been brought up to hate."

"Do you hate him?"

A tear tracked down Relena's face. "No. No, I don't hate him. How could I? I feel hurt, betrayed that he never thought to tell me the truth; but I can't hate him."

"Relena?" Dorothy shifted to sit next to her mistress and gently took her hand in her own. What she was about to say would undoubtedly cause more pain for her mistress, but it needed to be said.

"Yes?"

"I want you to think carefully about what I'm about to say. This infatuation you have with Heero. You have to let it go. He's obviously very much in love with Doctor Maxwell and that vet is very much in love with Heero. You've already experienced yourself what it feels like to be betrayed, to be lied to. Your uncle has revealed so much to you about how bitterness, hatred and revenge can destroy lives. Before you continue in your pursuit of Heero, I want you to think about that. Would you have history repeat itself just for your own selfish reasons? Would you have Heero trapped into something he doesn't want? Force him to live a lie like your father had to? You've already caused considerable pain and damage to an innocent person; could you live with yourself knowing you had destroyed true love?"

Relena swallowed hard and thought on Dorothy's words. They cut through her heart like a knife as she understood exactly what Dorothy was saying. Taking a mental step back, she looked at the situation from an outsider's view. Suddenly she was able to see clearly, all her actions over the past few weeks came back in startling clarity and she didn't like what she saw. Thinking hard she began to speak, slowly and deliberately choosing her words.

"After all that has been said I think it would be very wrong of me to continue, I realize that now. As much as I still want Heero, I can see he isn't in love with me. It hurts to know I was conceived out of wedlock, what my mother did to get out of her home situation without regard for my father. It hurts to know that my father went along with it just to keep his secret safe and then when he was discovered, the ridicule and pain he went through. He was a kind, loving man and I think I owe it to his memory not to repeat the same mistake. No, I'll contact Heero and Doctor Maxwell. I need to apologize to them both." Fresh tears began to fall down Relena's cheeks.

Dorothy pulled her mistress into her arms and held her close, letting the tears fall. She knew how hard this must have been for the woman and underneath she admired Relena's courage for facing the facts and admitting she was wrong.

"After my mother died, my father became my entire world. He was always there for me, listened to my ideas, hopes and dreams. Never once did he ridicule me, he only ever encouraged me. I felt the loss of my mother deeply and it took several years for that grief to subside. It never really leaves you though. I guess that's why, when I inherited this place I changed the stud name."

"I'd always wondered why you didn't continue with the original stud name of Darlian Stud," Dorothy said quietly.

Relena sniffled a couple of times and wiped her eyes. "After losing mother I threw myself into the breeding side of the stud, working on bloodlines and the like with my father. I thought it would help me to come to terms with losing my mother. During the time between my mother's death and my father's accident I tried to convince him to get out of the thoroughbreds, that breeding for the competition field would be more profitable. He didn't see it that way. Once he passed away, I
decided to follow my dream of breeding top quality competition horses. There was a growing market for them, demand far exceeding supply and a lot of people were looking overseas to purchase quality animals. Once I had made up my mind I changed the stud name. People associated the name Darlian with thoroughbreds, I wanted a completely separate identity and so I changed the name to Peacecraft Stud. It was also a way of honoring my mother's memory too. I had my own name changed back to that of my mother's maiden name and the stud as you know has grown from there."

"Why change your own name though. Surely you would have wanted to keep the Darlian name to honor your father?" Dorothy asked.

Relena sighed. "Yes, in one way it would be nice to keep the name, but then; one day I hope to marry and my name will be changed anyway so it really doesn't matter what my name is. Changing back to Peacecraft seemed a good idea and it keeps in touch with the stud as well. Although I had hoped to have been Mrs. Yuy. Guess that's shot to pieces now." Relena couldn't help the small chuckle.

Smiling softly, Dorothy released the woman that was still in her embrace and looked her in the eyes. "Miss Relena, forgive me if I am speaking out of turn, but I want you to know I think you have really grown up in these past few hours. It hasn't been easy to hear all that has been said and it's harder on you, I know. I admire you for the courage you're showing and I think you're right in apologizing to Doctor Maxwell and Heero. I also think you're doing the right thing in accepting Doctor Merquise back into your family. Now, I'm hungry so how about you get cleaned up and I'll take you out to dinner somewhere to celebrate."

Relena smiled. "I think I'd like that, Dorothy."

"Good."

* * *

Zechs left the Peacecraft stud, his own mind thick with thoughts of what had transpired. His heart was lighter though and there was a definite spring in his step. Now that the truth was out in the open and Relena had all the facts he sincerely hoped that the woman would think long and hard on what he'd said and change her outlook and attitude.

Somehow, he had a feeling she would.

He flipped his cell phone and pressed a number.

"Khushrenada."

"Treize, it's Zechs. Does that offer to call around still stand?"

"Zechs," Treize breathed. "Of course the offer is still open. How did it go? Are you okay? When can I expect you?"

"Slow down, Treize," Zechs laughed. "I'm pulling into your driveway now and I'll tell you all about it in a few minutes."

"Great." Treize hung up and went to the front door to greet his boyfriend and find out all that had transpired.

* * *

"Ride him harder Duo, he's having you on," Heero called from where he was sitting on the fence
watching Duo working Zero.

Duo was having a tough time with the gray. Zero had been neglected over the past few of days, the practice, Peacemillion and numerous other little things having kept Duo from being able to get the time to work the stallion. Now it seemed that Zero didn't want to work again and was giving Duo a hard time.

"Use more leg," called Heero. He could see that the stallion was simply being lazy and saying in his equine way to Duo: "Make me." Heero couldn't hold the chuckle though as he watched his boyfriend suddenly switch from 'passenger' to 'rider'.

"Right, you beast," growled Duo. "You're not going to make a fool out of me. I know you can work better than this and so help me, you're going to work." Duo set his mouth in a grim line, shortened his reins and sat down hard in his saddle. He used his seat and legs just how Heero had taught him to and rode the gray forward.

Zero tried to snatch the reins from Duo's hands.

"Oh no, you don't," snapped Duo and quickly took back the contact, applying his leg harder.

Zero decided to change tactics and threw in a small buck. It wasn't a nasty buck, but it did manage to unseat Duo who wasn't expecting it at all. The vet lost his stirrups and pitched forward onto Zero's neck. The shift of his rider's weight surprised Zero and the stallion came to an abrupt halt. The suddenness of the stop caused Duo to slip further forward and then slide rather ungracefully over the stallion's right shoulder and hit the dirt.

Watching the drama unfolding before him, Heero felt his heart leap into his mouth as Zero bucked and Duo fell unceremoniously to the ground. Quickly he jumped down from the fence and began to jog towards the pair trying to keep his worry at bay. As he drew closer he slowed to a fast walk; he didn't want to frighten Zero and possibly cause damage to Duo or the horse.

"Easy, boy," Heero said in soothing tones as he approached. His worry was growing as Duo hadn't moved. "Duo? Duo? Are you okay?" Heero said, his voice full of concern as he grabbed the horse's reins.

As Duo hit the ground, all the air was forced out of his lungs. He closed his eyes as he desperately tried to force oxygen back into those lungs, only to have them struggle to do so. The pain was excruciating, but he managed to get some air in. He felt like a landed fish the way he was gasping. He became aware of Heero's voice, but couldn't answer as he didn't have enough oxygen to spare right now.

Heero yanked the reins over Zero's head and crouched beside Duo, He removed Duo's helmet and pushed those chestnut bangs back, relieved to see Duo's eyes open. He picked up on the wheezing and gathered that Duo had winded himself. He hoped that was all that was wrong. "Stay where you are and try to take shallow breaths, deep ones will only hurt," Heero said quietly. He'd been winded himself a couple of times and knew exactly how it felt.

Duo tried to do as Heero said, drawing shallow breaths and slowly deepening them as his lungs began to return to normal. Once he could breathe properly again, he began to sit up.

"Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself anywhere else?" Heero asked as he looked his lover over for
any sign of injury.

"Just winded," replied Duo. "Oh, and my pride is a little dented." Duo turned to look at Zero and narrowed his eyes.

Zero looked back innocently. He'd only given a small buck, he hadn't expected his rider to become unseated, and he *had* stopped when he felt that weight shifting.

"Come here, you rotten animal. Fuck with me, will you?" Duo's tone was low and annoyed. Gingerly he stood up, put his helmet back on and faced Zero.

_zero's innocent expression turned to one of guilt as he heard the tone of voice. Zero stepped to the side and tried to hide behind Heero.

"Oh no, you don't, buddy," Heero stated and moved to the side, handing Duo the reins again. "You did the crime, now you do the time."

"Buck me off, will you? I'll show you who's boss. You're going to work twice as hard now." Duo slipped the reins back over Zero's head, grasped the stirrup and remounted. Collecting his reins, Duo pushed his helmet down a little harder on his head and then turned the gray around. "Now, let's see some proper work."

Heero watched, an amused smile on his face as Duo rode the stallion away. The snicker followed once Duo was out of earshot as he watched Zero completely give in and let Duo make him work.

Half an hour later, Duo brought the gray to a walk. Zero was breathing hard, sweat covered the gray and Duo wasn't much better. But he'd shown Zero who was boss. Zero decided it would be to his advantage not to try any more tricks on the usually nice human again, not if it meant he had to work this hard. Oh, and he didn't want to miss out on any carrots either.

"I think he needs a hose down," said Heero as Duo rode up to the gate where Heero waited.

"He's no the only one," replied Duo and sniffed himself. "I smell like a soggy horse rug."

"If it's any consolation, you don't look like one."

"Thanks, I think."

Heero put the gear away while Duo hosed Zero off. Once the sweat was washed out of the stallion's coat, Duo turned the hose off and picked up the sweat scraper, running it in fluid lines over the gray coat and removing the excess water[1]. Heero returned with Zero's cotton summer rug and handed it to Duo who put it on to stop the horse from catching a chill. Zero stood perfectly still, displaying impeccable manners while the nice human and his master tended to him.

"Shall I put him back out in the paddock?" asked Duo, glancing at his watch.

"Yeah. It's only four, a little early to put him in yet. I'll come back down later while you're in consults and bring them all in," replied Heero.

"Okay." Duo undid the lead rope from the ring in the wall.

Zero began to nuzzle Duo's pockets.

"And just what is it you're after?" Duo said as he eyed the gray.

Zero blinked and looked innocently at the nice human. He gave a low wuffle and nosed Duo's
pockets again in a hopeful fashion.

"I don't think you deserve any carrots, not after your performance."

Zero gave another soft whicker, turned his liquid, brown eyes up to full force and nuzzled Duo.

Duo melted. "Okay. Here you go, but you don't deserve it, you rogue." Duo couldn't keep the amusement out of his voice as he fed Zero a carrot.

"What a push over," sniggered Heero.

Duo blushed and then turned back to the stallion. "Come on, you. Out to the paddock, the company here is getting a little oppressive."

Heero couldn't help but laugh as Duo led the horse back out to the paddock.

* * *

Duo stepped out of the bedroom toweling his hair. He'd taken his shower as soon as he got back to the house, complaining he still smelt like a stable. Heero had made them a coffee and sat with the two mugs and Duo's hairbrush in the lounge room. Duo draped the towel around his shoulders, Heero picking up the mass of chestnut and working the tangles out of it. It took him a little while to do as he only had the use of one hand.

"I'll bet you'll be glad to get that cast off," remarked Duo as he sipped his coffee. He had half an hour before evening consults started.

"You have no idea," replied Heero.

"What time was the appointment?"

"One o'clock, two weeks tomorrow," Heero said and continued to brush Duo's long mane. "Not that I'm counting the days or anything."

Duo chuckled and closed his eyes, content to enjoy Heero brushing his hair.

The 'phone rang, disturbing the peace. Heero dropped the hair brush and grabbed the 'phone from the small table beside where he was sitting. "Maxwell Veterinary Practice."

Duo continued to sit on the floor between Heero's knees, hoping the call wasn't a call out.

"He's right here, Mr. Klink, I'll put him on." Heero reached down and handed the 'phone to Duo. "It's Mr. Klink for you."

Duo took the offered handset, a puzzled look on his face. Why would his solicitor be calling him? The court case was set for next week and everything was pretty well 'sewn up' as Klink had put it. "Duo Maxwell speaking. What can I do for you, Mr. Klink?"

* * *

"Are you sure, Miss Peacecraft?" Mr. Randall twiddled the pen in his hand. "Well, yes, I agree that would be the best course of action to take under the circumstances. In all honesty, we would be fighting a losing battle." Randall dropped the pen to the table. "I can't guarantee that it will be accepted, all I can do is try. Okay then. I'll see what I can do and call you back once I have any information. Thank you, Miss Peacecraft, I'll be in touch."
Randall replaced the receiver and stared at the wall for a few moments. He couldn't say he wasn't pleased with the news he'd just received, actually he thought it was the most sensible thing he'd heard all day. He fetched the Peacecraft file from his cabinet and flipped it open. Scanning through, he added a few notes and then picked up the 'phone.

"Gordon and Klink, how can I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Klink, please."

"May I ask who's calling?"

"It's Randall."

"Just one moment, please, I'll see if he's free, Mr. Randall."

"Thank you." Randall waited patiently while he was on hold, the music not unpleasant.

"Klink here. What can I do for you, Randall?"

"You remember the case of Maxwell versus Peacecraft?"

"Yes. The hearing is next week."

"Klink, I've got some news for you that you need to discuss with your client."

* * *

"I see," said Duo, his face impassive as he listened to the solicitor. "No, that sounds logical to me. What would you recommend?"

Heero watched from the couch as Duo spoke with the solicitor. He couldn't ascertain whether it was good news or bad news, Duo's face not indicating anything other than deep thought.

"Okay. Thank you for that, Mr. Klink. Look, I'd like to think about it and discuss this with my partner before making a decision. Can I call you back tomorrow? Thank you. Good bye." Duo passed the receiver back to Heero who placed it in the cradle.

"Mind if I ask what that was all about?" Heero said softly.

"That was Klink," replied Duo absently as he worried his bottom lip with his teeth.

"I gathered that much, I did answer the thing," replied Heero in an amused tone.

"Sorry." Duo gave a sheepish grin and then hauled himself to his feet before sitting down next to Heero.

"So, are you going to tell me or am I going to have to play twenty questions?"

Duo snickered. "Klink received a call from the pink parasite's lawyer. She wants to settle out of court."

Heero's eyes widened. "You're joking?"

"Nope," Duo grinned.

"Are you going to?"
"I don't know," replied Duo. "After everything she's said and done I think she deserves to be taken to the cleaners and humiliated like she's done to me."

Heero had to agree, but he wanted to know more. "What did Klink say? What brought about the sudden change?"

"Klink said he'd received a call from Randall, the parasite's lawyer. From what he was told, Miss Peace-of-crap has had a change of heart."

"Really?" replied Heero sarcastically. He didn't mean to be bitter, but the anger he felt over what that woman had done to Duo still rankled him.

"I'd bet she knows there's not a hope in hell she can win this court case and rather than have everything dragged through the court she thinks she can settle it the easy way."

Heero frowned. "There's something not quite right about this."

"I agree," said Duo as his brows knitted together "Something has happened to make her change her mind, she's not exactly been pleasant company in the past. I wonder if it has anything to do with Zechs being her uncle or the fact that I helped to save her horse?"

"I honestly don't know, Duo. Are you going to settle out of court?"

"Not sure. There's more to this than meets the eye and I'd like to know exactly what it is that's made this parasite change her mind. Heero? I've gotta get going to consults, could you do me a huge favor and give Zechs or Treize a call? See if you can't find out if anything else has gone on that would make her pinkness change her tune?"

"Of course."

Heero had done as Duo requested, Treize didn't give him much though, he really couldn't divulge something that wasn't his business to speak about. When he'd spoken to Zechs the blonde vet had been a little more enlightening, saying he'd had further talks with Relena and that the woman had been doing some serious thinking. Although what they had discussed, Zechs said was up to Relena to speak about. He did seem happy though that she wasn't going to contest the charges any further.

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The next day, Duo was still deciding whether or not to accept the offer of an out of court settlement. Duo was in the stables checking on Peacemillion who had made an excellent recovery when Zechs rolled up. "Hey, Zechs."

"Hi, Duo. How is the patient today?"

"Pretty much back to normal," replied Duo as he noted down his observations on the horse's chart. "Should be able to remove the stitches in another four days."

"Good. I contacted Relena to let her know that he should be okay to return to the stud today. I said I would contact Walker after I'd spoken with you to arrange a convenient time to collect him."

"Well, he can leave anytime they want to fetch him. I'd say Zero will be pleased to see him go."

Zechs chuckled. "Someone's nose being pushed out of joint?"

"You could say that," Duo laughed.
"Duo? About this court thing."

"Yes?" Duo arched an eyebrow.

"I know it's none of my business, but for what it's worth I think maybe you should consider settling out of court. Despite the fact that Relena is my niece, she's done some pretty nasty things to you and Heero, but I think you will find she's changed."

"I don't know, Zechs. I've not made up my mind yet. She's been pretty rotten towards me ever since she met me. It's going to take a lot more than a simple out of court settlement to make me forget. And how do I know she won't try the same thing again?"

"I know, Duo, and I can quite understand how you feel. I will respect your decision either way though and if I can help out, you only have to ask."

"Thank you."

"I'll contact Walker and see when he can come and pick up Peacemillion." Zechs stepped outside the stable to make the call, Duo following him a moment later.

"Would three this afternoon be okay, Duo?"

"That's fine."

"Okay." Zechs arranged for the stallion to be picked up at three, promising to return himself and give Walker the instructions he would need on Peacemillion's post operative care.

* * *

Duo headed back down to the stable block at ten to three, Heero had been doing a little work with Shini in the paddock and brought the colt in when he spotted Duo walking towards the stables. Zechs arrived moments later and disappeared with Duo into the dispensary to put together the antibiotics, needles and syringes that would need to go with Peacemillion. Having given Shini a quick brush over, Heero took the colt back to the paddock, shutting the gate as he heard the sound of an approaching car. He turned to see the Peacecraft float coming down the driveway.

Walker brought the car and float to a smooth stop and turned the engine off. Once out of the car he went to the tail gate and lowered it in readiness for Peacemillion.

Hearing the car and float pull up, Zechs and Duo left the dispensary, dumping the drugs onto the bench in the stable block and went out to greet Walker.

As they stepped outside, Duo stopped and his eyes narrowed.

Spotting the two vets walking out of the stable block, Relena moved away from the car and towards them. She kept her face neutral, noting the look she was getting from Doctor Maxwell and cringing inside; although she really couldn't blame the man. Taking a deep breath and straightening her spine, Relena stopped and extended her hand. "Doctor Maxwell, I'd like to thank you for all you have done for my horse. I also wish to apologize for my behavior towards you."

Duo's face took on a wary look. He eyed the offered hand and glanced at the woman. He could see the conflict going on inside Relena's eyes. Hesitantly, he shook her hand. "You're welcome in regards to the horse. As for the apology, I don't think I can accept that. It's going to take a lot more than an apology to right the wrongs you have committed."
Relena lowered her gaze and hand. "I know, but I am truly sorry." Slowly she raised her eyes again. "Doctor Maxwell, if you would be so kind as to spare me a little of your time, I'd really like to talk to you. I have a few things that need to be said, an explanation to offer you and I'd be most grateful if you would listen. Maybe after you hear what I have to say, you will reconsider accepting my apology."

Duo thought about it for a moment and then nodded. "Okay. I guess it can't do any harm to listen."

"Thank you. Umm... Do you have somewhere a little more private that we could talk?"

"We can go into the dispensary if you like." Duo didn't really want to take the woman to the house, it was bad enough she was in the stables. At least it would be much easier to fumigate the stables than the house; oh, and he always had a couple of scalpels in the dispensary he could use for self defense if necessary.

"That will be fine." Relena followed Duo into the stables and small dispensary.

Shutting the door behind them, Duo crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the small bench, waiting for Relena to speak.

Relena took a quick look around the small room and then resigned herself to having to stand up while she spoke; there wasn't room inside for a chair. Clearing her throat, she took a deep breath and then began.

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[1] Sweat Scraper: Another nifty gadget made from wood or hard plastic with a rubber half moon 'lip'. You use the rubber edge to follow the line of the hair, applying light pressure to remove excess water from a horse's coat. To see what one looks like follow the link below.

Duo wasn't at all happy, but he supposed the least he could do was let the woman have her say before he threw her off the property. Besides, he was curious to know what had happened to make the poisonous pink thing change her mind.

Relena knew it wouldn't be easy talking to the vet; especially after all she had done in the past. She could hope that he would hear her out and then at least he would know why she had been so cruel to him. She wasn't expecting him to forgive her, she had no rights to ask for that; but she could hope he would at least accept her apology.

Speaking slowly but clearly, Relena began to explain. "Doctor Maxwell, I know I have said some pretty horrible things to you and caused you a lot of grief. I've come to realize that what I have said and done is wrong. I have no right to judge you, no right to accuse you and certainly no right to tell you how you should live your life."

"Damn right, you don't," growled Duo.

"I'm sorry, Doctor Maxwell. Over these past couple of days I've had some long talks with my uncle, talks that have been both shattering and enlightening. I won't go into all those details though, many of them are personal and don't concern you; but suffice to say, what I have discovered has opened my eyes to a lot of things..."

Relena spoke for quite a while, explaining a little of what her childhood had been like, her grandfather and then her mother's insistence that all things homosexual were wrong and perverted. She didn't divulge anything about her own conception or parents' lies to her, but she did admit to discovering that her own father had been a homosexual.

"As you can imagine, Doctor Maxwell, that came as a shock to me."

"I'll bet it did," mused Duo. He had to admit, what Relena had told him did explain a lot of the reasons for her hostility towards him and he couldn't help but feel a little sorry for the woman. She had obviously gone through a very traumatic time and he knew it must be costing her dearly to face him and admit to all this. He had to give her credit for her courage though.

"I've done a lot of thinking, mainly about my father and I realize that despite his... his interest in men," Relena was still having a hard time admitting that, "his love for me, the person he was, his caring attitude and love of life remained the same. I think I'm beginning to understand that the person you are inside doesn't change just because you enjoy the company of the same sex."

Duo gave a soft smile. "Something tells me you have learnt a very hard lesson, Miss Peacecraft."

Relena gave a sigh. "This isn't easy to come to terms with, to find out that all you have been led to believe, all you have been brought up to respect and understand, has been nothing but a lie, a fabrication. It isn't easy to change an attitude that has been ground in since birth and I know it will take quite some time for me to change my way of thinking. But, I am trying, Doctor Maxwell."

"I can see that. It must have taken a great deal of courage for you to tell me this, and I appreciate that."

"I realize now that Heero isn't interested in me, that the things I accused you of are completely
unfounded. I don't want to make the same mistakes my parents made; I couldn't live with myself knowing I'd destroyed something precious to someone else. I know I've probably burned all my bridges and ruined any possibility of having you accept my apology, but I really am sorry."

Duo thought for a moment and then turned his eyes to Relena. "I can't deny that what you have done hasn't hurt me. I have suffered both personally, financially and emotionally because of your selfish acts. I've had to endure an investigation by the AVB, not that I have anything to hide from them as was proven, but the inconvenience of the investigation, not to mention the damage that caused to my reputation cannot be so easily forgotten. I do believe though that you are genuine in your remorse and while it will take a long time for me to forgive you for what you have done, I think that for now, we should call a truce."

Raising her eyes, Relena focused on the tall, slender vet before her. "Thank you. A truce would be a good way to start."

"I also think you should apologize to Heero," Duo continued. "He's also suffered from your constant interference, more than I have, in some ways."

"Yes, I know. I do intend to apologize to him as well, that's if he will allow me to speak with him."

"He will."

"Thank you, Doctor Maxwell. I know I don't deserve the kindness you've shown me and I do appreciate it. I'll be going now; I'd like to speak with Heero before we leave, if that's okay."

"I'll let him know." Duo opened the door to the dispensary and escorted the woman out.

"Thank you again, Doctor Maxwell, for all you did to save my horse. You are a good vet."

Duo nodded and spotting Heero off to one side, strolled over towards his boyfriend.

"You okay?" Heero asked, noting Duo looked a little peaked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," replied Duo and ran a hand over his tired eyes. "I've just had quite an in depth chat with Miss Pinkness, rather enlightening too, I might add."

"Oh?"

"She wished to speak with you, if you want to listen, that is."

"Really?" Heero's eyes narrowed. "I don't know if I have anything to say to her."

"Heero? Go talk with her. She won't try anything on, I promise you that. Just hear her out and I'm sure you will see, as I did, why she's the way she is. I'm not saying that excuses her behavior in any way, but it does make things a little easier to understand."

Heero trusted his lover wouldn't lie to him or set him up. Heero nodded. "Okay then, I'll listen to her, but I'm not promising to be polite."

"No one's asking you to," Duo chuckled and then stole a kiss. "I'll be out here if you need rescuing."

"I'm sure I can handle one woman by myself," Heero huffed.

"Scalpels are in the third drawer."

Heero snorted and walked over to Relena, his boyfriend's laughter trailing in his wake.
While Duo had been talking with Relena, Zechs had cleverly taken Walker out to the small paddock adjacent to the stables where Peacemillion was. Walker was overjoyed to see the stallion again and it seemed Peacemillion was just as pleased to see Walker. The horse immediately walked over to the fence when he heard Walker's voice.

Zechs patiently explained all that they had done for the stallion including the post operative care. He also went through the feed requirements for the stallion while he was still recovering and made an appointment to come out to the Peacecraft Stud and remove the stitches in four days time.

Walker listened intently to the instructions from the vet regarding Peacemillion's care, nodding in the appropriate places as he made a fuss of the stallion.

"He's still requiring two shots a day of Penicillin, one in the morning and one at night. We have managed to avoid any infection thus far and the course should be finished in another five days. All being well, he shouldn't require any further treatment. I'll discuss his feeding changes with you once I remove the stitches, by then he should be able to resume a normal diet, although I'd keep the concentrates low for a bit longer as he's not going to be doing much in the way of exercise and we don't need other complications due to the feed being too rich for him."

"Thank you, Doctor Merquise."

"My pleasure, Walker. Now, if you would come back inside the stables, I'm sure Doctor Maxwell would like to speak to you and then we can give you the drugs you'll need and send you on your way."

Walking back inside, Zechs smiled as he spotted Duo collecting all the drugs together. Something about the vet's relaxed manner told him that the talk Duo had had with Relena must have gone better than he'd thought. He noticed both Heero and Relena were missing and assumed that they must be having a talk as well.

Duo looked up as Zechs and Walker approached. "A bit different to what he was a few days ago, isn't he?" Duo said as he wrote the last of the instructions on the bottle of penicillin.

"He's certainly made a remarkable recovery, Doctor Maxwell."

"I'm assuming Doctor Merquise has spoken to you about Peacemillion's care?"

"Yes, yes, he has."

"Good. Here's the drugs you will need. I've written the dosage on the bottle and it needs to be kept in the 'fridge. Ten ml twice a day, morning and night, given intramuscularly. There's enough there for the next five days and I've also put in enough needles and syringes to see you through. If you should find you need more for any reason then contact either Doctor Merquise or myself and we will supply you with them." Duo handed Walker a paper bag with the drugs and other necessities inside.

"Thank you, Doctor Maxwell." Walker took the offered bag from Duo and glanced inside. Scrunching the bag up, Walker turned his attention back to the braided man. "Doctor Maxwell, I wanted to thank you too for all you have done for Peacemillion. I know the circumstances were not what you would call ideal and I wouldn't have blamed you for refusing the use of your facilities and assistance in the operation. I don't know all that's going on between my boss and you guys, and frankly, I don't want to know. I'm just grateful you are a professional first and foremost and saw fit to treat Peacemillion." Walker lowered his eyes, he wasn't used to saying so much all at once.
Duo smiled and offered his hand, shaking Walker's. "It was my pleasure, Walker. It's why I became a vet after all, to treat those and help those that cannot help themselves. Regardless of any differences I may have with your boss, I cannot stand back and see an animal suffer when there is something I can do to help it."

Zechs looked up as Heero and Relena stepped out of the dispensary. Noting where Zechs' gaze had gone, Duo's followed the same direction and he gave a soft smile. Relena looked tired but relieved; Heero looked uncomfortable, but not homicidal. Duo guessed their talk must have gone okay.

"I suggest we get Peacemillion loaded on the float now, I'm sure you're anxious to get him home," said Zechs, breaking the silence.

"Right you are," said Walker. "I'll go get him then." Walker left to fetch the horse, Duo moved towards Heero while Zechs stepped to speak with Relena.

"You okay?" Duo asked as Zechs took Relena outside.

"Yeah. I'll tell you all about it afterwards, once everyone has gone."

"Okay." Duo left it at that and went to give Walker a hand with the horse float.

Five minutes later, Walker was disappearing down the driveway, Relena in the passenger seat and Peacemillion safely in the back. Out in the paddock, Zero gave a loud neigh, kinked his tail and snorted before pawing at the ground and tossing his head. Scythe continued grazing, Shini raised his head for a brief moment and then decided the grass was more interesting than his father's antics.

"I'll be going too," Zechs said as he turned from watching the disappearing car. "I've got a couple of cases to see before I finish up. Thank you again, Duo, for everything."

"My pleasure, Zechs."

As Zechs' car departed so a peaceful silence descended over the stables. "I think I need a coffee," said Duo.

"I could go one myself," replied Heero and took his lover's hand in his, leading them both to the house.

* * *

Sitting in the lounge room, coffees almost finished, Duo leaned back and thought about what had transpired earlier. Heero had related what Relena had told him and Duo reciprocated by informing Heero of what had occurred during his 'talk'. Both had pretty much the same information, Relena having told them both the same story, although her apology to Heero had been accepted while Duo had yet to grant that grace.

"Thought any more on the court case and the proposal?" Heero asked as he finished his coffee and set the mug down on the small table.

"A little," replied Duo and also set his mug down. He reached for Heero, drawing the rider into his arms and kissing him soundly.

Heero returned the kiss and then snuggled deeper into Duo's embrace. "Are you going to accept an out of court settlement? Or are you going to proceed with the case?"

"Given the circumstances and what her Pinkness has said today, I can see why she was so cruel and
vindictive. It doesn't excuse her though and I still think she needs to be taught that she can't go around accusing innocent people."

"Then you are going to drag her through the court," Heero stated.

"No, Heero. No, I'm not. I'll take the offer of an out of court settlement on the condition that she leaves us alone."

"I think that's being very generous, Duo."

Duo sighed softly. "Heero, if I was to take her through the court I know I would win the case, she would be humiliated, embarrassed and suffer damage to her reputation. While that may make me feel better, it really doesn't solve anything, if anything I'm really no better than her for doing that. No, I think she realizes just how rotten she's been, plus all she's just discovered about her life wouldn't be easy to accept. I think she's been punished enough by having her life turned upside down."

Heero leaned up and gave his lover a warm, tender kiss. "You have a very big heart, Doctor Maxwell. Sometimes I think you're too kind and compassionate, but I understand your reasoning. I love you, Duo."

Duo blushed. "Awww, Heero." Rather than feel any more embarrassed, Duo proceeded to kiss Heero senseless. When they broke for air, both men were flushed and panting heavily.

"Want to show me just how compassionate you can be?" Heero asked, his tone husky as his hips rubbed against Duo's thigh.

"Why? Do you have something you need help with?" Duo returned, his voice innocent.

"I might."

"Mmm... I just might be able to help with that." Duo's hand slid down over Heero's arm and across his lover's hip to the front of Heero's jeans. Nimble fingers sought out the button and zipper, parting the cloth and then dipping inside to palm against the rising hardness.

"Ahhh... Nice," moaned Heero as his hips thrust lazily into the contact.

Chuckling lightly, Duo dipped his fingers beneath the elastic of Heero's briefs, tugging the material over the crown of Heero's erection. He slipped his hand under the fabric and ran his fingers over the thick shaft before curling them around and stroking lightly.

"More," Heero panted and wriggled a little.

Eager to comply, Duo shifted a little and brought his other hand around to push Heero's briefs further down and allow him easier access to the turgid flesh. Once he had freedom of movement, Duo began to stroke in earnest, determined to bring his lover off.

With each tug to his sensitive cock, Heero's hips thrust forth, seeking more stimulation. His breathing became rapid, heart pounding in his chest as Duo's hand brought him closer to completion. Feeling the rising tide of pleasure, Heero's eyes squeezed shut as his orgasm was drawn from him.

Duo continued to stroke, feeling Heero beginning to tense. He leaned close and kissed a spot just below Heero's ear and whispered, "Come for me, Heero."

A soft cry tore from Heero's throat as his balls constricted. Heat flared in his groin as his essence spurted from the small slit. The hand on his shaft continued to pump, slowly milking all his seed from
inside. Only when the tremors had faded did that hand still. Heero collapsed against Duo's side, floating in the afterglow and enjoying every minute of it. As his senses came back on line he was aware of the sticky mess at his groin, and the rather large bulge in Duo's pants. With a wicked smirk, Heero slid out of Duo's arms and onto the floor. He settled between Duo's thighs and looked up. His blue eyes clouded with lust as he reached forth and released Duo's swollen cock from inside his pants and boxers.

"Oh, shit," groaned Duo as Heero's wet mouth encircled the head of his penis. His gaze connected with Heero's for a second and he had to close his eyes, the sight was simply too erotic. Heero's lips surrounding the head of his cock, the feel of that talented tongue stroking along his length and under the ridge of the crown driving all rational thought from his mind.

Heero began a series of licks and sucks along Duo's length. He loved the taste of the vet and would happily suck Duo any time the vet wanted him to. Opening his mouth wider, he drew the shaft deeper into his mouth until the head was pressing against the back of his throat and his nose was pressed into wiry, chestnut hair. The scent of Duo swam along his nerves, bathing him and increasing his own desire to please.

"Ah, yes. Good, Heero, so good," Duo moaned and let his head fall back against the couch. His legs opened a little wider, a hand snuck up to thread through chocolate locks and encourage Heero to continue.

Opening his throat, Heero swallowed Duo completely. He smiled to himself as he felt the shudder pass through his lover's body with the extra sensation. Heero's throat constricted in a series of swallows around the thick length of Duo and then Heero began to hum.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Duo cried out as his cock twitched and spasmed. The extra stimulation of Heero humming tipped him over the edge and into nirvana. Pleasure crashed over and through him, his hips jerked as he emptied his seed inside Heero's mouth and throat.

Once Duo's cock began to deflate, Heero let the organ slip from his mouth, licking gently and cleaning off any seed he may have missed. Once he was satisfied that his lover was clean, Heero shifted and pulled himself back to the couch, staring with a satisfied smile on his face at the sight of his boneless lover sprawled next to him.

Sanity returning, Duo managed to open his eyes and gaze at Heero. "Geeze, you sure know how to take away the tension, Heero," he managed to get out.

"Glad I could be of service." Heero leaned in and stole a kiss, encouraging Duo's tongue to play with his and taste himself.

Breaking apart, Duo continued to recline and then glanced at the clock. "As much as I'd love to stay here with you, I'm afraid I can't. Consults will be starting soon and I need to get cleaned up. So do you," he added and snickered.

Heero looked down at his soiled jeans. "Guess I'd better change and see if I can convince Gertrude to do a load of washing."

Duo laughed and stood up, tucking himself away as he did so. He reached a hand to Heero and pulled his boyfriend to his feet, then turned and went to the bedroom to change.

* * *

Duo hummed to himself as he waited for the call to connect, eyes flicking through the appointment
book for that day. The call connected and Duo quickly averted his attention.

"Gordon and Klink. How can I help you?"

"Good morning, it's Doctor Duo Maxwell here. I wonder if I could have a word with Mr. Klink please."

"One moment and I'll see if he's free."

Duo waited for a moment.

"I'm putting you through now, Doctor Maxwell."

"Thank you."

"Klink here, Doctor Maxwell. How can I help?"

"Mr. Klink, I'm calling in regards to the court case due to be heard next week. I've done some thinking on the offer of an out of court settlement."

"Ah. Have you made a decision?"

"Yes, I have. I've decided to accept the offer and not pursue the charges."

"I see."

"There is a condition to accepting the settlement though. I will accept the offer on the condition that Miss Peacecraft leaves both myself and Heero alone. Should she break that condition then I will have no choice but to resume legal action against her."

"Very well, Doctor Maxwell. I agree with you, it would be best to take the offered settlement, but with the condition you have stated. Look, I'll get right onto drawing up a document to that effect and fax it through to you for your approval. If you agree with the document I'll contact Randall and let him know. It's then up to him to get his client to agree and sign the document. If she does I'll contact you so we can arrange a meeting between ourselves and the defendant to sign the papers and receive the settlement."

"Thank you, Mr. Klink. I'll await the document then."

"No problem, Doctor Maxwell. I'll be in touch."

Duo hung up the 'phone feeling a lot better than he had over the past few days. He scanned the book again and noted it was almost full. He smiled to himself, business was still going pretty well despite all the recent events. Donning his white coat, Duo went through to the consulting room to prepare for the morning consults.

* * *

"Peacecraft Stud."

"May I speak with Miss Peacecraft, please? It's Mr. Randall, her solicitor, here."

"Of course, Mr. Randall. One moment, please, I'll just get her for you." Dorothy placed the receiver on the table and went in search of her mistress. She found her in the study. "Mr. Randall is on the 'phone for you, Miss Relena."
"Thank you, Dorothy. I'll take it in here." Relena turned and picked up the 'phone on her desk, Dorothy returned to the parlor and hung up the other receiver.

"Mr. Randall? It's Relena Peacecraft."

"Ah, Miss Peacecraft. I trust you are well?"

"Yes, thank you. I take it you have some news for me?"

"Yes, I do. I've received a document from Mr. Klink, Doctor Maxwell's solicitor..." Randall went on to explain what the document said, outlining the conditions to accepting the offer of an out of court settlement.

Relena listened intently, taking in all that Randall said. While she had to admit she was disappointed that Doctor Maxwell had stipulated she leave him and Heero alone, she really couldn't blame him. A tiny part of her had hoped they may have become friends. Not wanting to dwell any further on miserable thoughts, Relena began to ask a couple of questions of her own.

After discussing the proposed document thoroughly and hearing Randall's thoughts on the matter, Relena agreed to sign.

"I'll let Klink know and then we can arrange a place and time suitable to both parties for you to sign the document."

"Thank you, Mr. Randall."

"My pleasure, Miss Peacecraft, I'll be in touch."

Relena returned the 'phone to its cradle and got on with the paperwork she'd been doing before the call.

* * *

Three days later, Duo, Heero, Relena and Mr. Randall met at the offices of Gordon and Klink to sign the document. All reread the document before agreeing again and then signing in the appropriate places. Relena was very polite and avoided discussing anything not related directly to the business they were there to conduct, something both Heero and Duo were grateful for. It was uncomfortable enough without any further stress being added.

Once all was signed, Randall and Klink shook hands, as did Duo and Heero with both solicitors. Relena also offered her hand, Klink shaking it and followed by Heero. When Duo stepped forward to shake Relena's hand, the woman gave him a sad smile.

"I really am sorry, Doctor Maxwell, for all the trouble I've caused you. I do intend to try and change my ways, it won't be easy but I am trying. I hope that someday you will be able to forgive me for my stupidity and silly mistakes."

Duo gave a sigh, he couldn't help himself. His kind heart won him over and he offered a soft smile in return. "I'm sorry things went this way and turned out like they did. I think if maybe we had all met under different circumstances we may have been friends. I realize you have had a major upheaval in your life and I think you're coping well with that. You showed a lot of courage admitting your mistakes and offering an apology. I didn't accept it at the time, but I've done some thinking since then and I'm willing to accept your apology now."

Relena's eyes gave a small spark. "Thank you. I appreciate that. It means a lot to me. Now, I really
should be going. Good luck to you, Doctor Maxwell."

"Thank you. Good luck to you too."

Heero stepped up to see what was taking his boyfriend so long and caught the tail end of the conversation. He quirked an eyebrow at Duo but then switched his attention to Relena as the woman spoke.

"I hear you're on the short list for the Nations Cup team?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then I wish you success. I hope you are selected to represent the country. You're a top rider, Heero, and if you ever find yourself needing a good horse, feel free to call me and if I've got anything suitable in the stables, it's yours to ride."

Heero looked totally dumbfounded; Duo wasn't much better.

"Call it my way of trying to make up for the wrongs I've caused. Good day, gentlemen." Turning, Relena left.

Duo and Heero simply stared after the woman.

"Well, I'll be," said Heero.

"Well, shit." Duo rubbed the back of his neck.

Mr. Klink cleared his throat behind them. "Doctor Maxwell, I need you to sign a release form, please."

"Uh?" Duo turned around to see the solicitor standing behind him an amused smile on his face. "A release form? What for?"

"In case you had forgotten, there's the small matter of a certain sum of money being paid in compensation to you. It's currently sitting in the company's bank account and I need your signature to release those funds into your account."

"Oh, yeah," Duo grinned. "I'd forgotten about that."

Heero tagged along behind Duo as they stepped into the office once more and watched as Duo signed the papers.

"Thank you, Doctor Maxwell. The funds will be transferred into your account this afternoon."

"Thank you, Mr. Klink. You'll send me your account?"

"Of course. Good bye, gentlemen, and if there is anything I can help you with in the future, please call me."

"We will," replied Duo and headed out the office, Heero right beside him. Stepping out into the bright sunshine, Duo glanced at his watch. "It's almost lunchtime, fancy grabbing a bite to eat in town to celebrate before we head back to the practice?"

"I'd love to, Duo." It wasn't often the pair of them got to enjoy a simple pleasure such as eating out. The erratic hours Duo worked as well as Heero's busy schedule didn't allow for such frivolities and Heero wasn't about to turn down the opportunity to enjoy a quiet meal with his lover.
"Great!" Duo led them down a couple of streets and then stopped outside a small tavern. "They do a nice lunch here and the place is usually fairly quiet too."

Heero followed Duo inside and his eyes lit up. The place was small and yet cozy, a few patrons were scattered along the bar with one or two at tables. Duo took them over to the bar where a blackboard sat announcing the meals available for lunch. Heero's eyes skimmed over it.

"What do you fancy, Heero?"

"I'll try the farmhouse pie," Heero replied.

"One farmhouse pie and one chicken hot pot, please." Duo ordered their lunch and then got them a couple of beers, carrying the beers over to a table and sitting down. Heero sat opposite and took his offered beer "A toast," said Duo softly. "To the future."

"To the future," echoed Heero and touched his glass to Duo's. The beer was cold and slightly bitter, but no less refreshing. Heero couldn't help but note the spark in Duo's eye. He knew Duo had every reason to be happy and celebrate, but he couldn't help feeling he was missing something. Then it dawned on him. The release papers Duo had signed for the compensation. "Duo?"

"Yes, Heero?"

"I have the distinct feeling we are celebrating more than just a win over Relena."

"Smart boy," Duo snickered. He was almost bouncing out of his seat.

"Care to tell me what else we are celebrating?"

Duo grinned. "By this time tomorrow, Heero, you should be looking at the owner of the Maxwell Veterinary Practice."

"Huh?" Heero wasn't sure he understood. "But you're already the owner."

"Actually, I'm only the owner of the business name; the bank is the owner of all the property and assets, or at least they will be until this time tomorrow."

"You mean?"

"Yup. Tomorrow I will pay off the mortgage, Heero. The property, business, assets, everything will be completely mine." Duo's grin almost split his face in two.

"If you don't mind me asking; just how much did you get in that settlement?"

"Two hundred and twenty five thousand."

Heero promptly choked on his beer. Once he'd managed to calm himself and locate his voice he faced his lover, eyes wide. "Well, shit!"

Duo continued to grin. "I can't tell you how good that will feel to walk into the bank tomorrow and pay off that mortgage."

"Looks like Relena had her uses after all then," Heero smiled.

"Yup. Best apology I ever got," snickered Duo.

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Chapter 42

True to his word, Duo went into the bank the next day and paid off the mortgage. He signed the necessary papers, transferred the money across and walked out the bank a 'free' man. Free of debt that was. His footsteps were light as he clutched the receipt and copy of the paperwork, the original deeds and paperwork having been stored at the bank in a safety deposit box.

On his way home, his thoughts switched to Heero and the up coming camp. Heero was due to get his cast removed in five days, he would then have a week to work the arm up again before the camp. Being familiar with similar cases, although in animals, Duo knew there would be a certain amount of muscle wastage, not to mention weakness in the arm. Being ever analytical, Duo's mind switched to ways in which Heero could possibly strengthen his arm in the short space of time. He really couldn't come up with anything other than time and exercise. Heero would need to start the arm off slowly if he wanted to avoid any further complications. Duo could only hope that Heero would be capable of riding and controlling Zero.

But Heero was a skilled rider and Duo didn't doubt those skills.

All this thinking was beginning to give him a headache.

Driving down the driveway and into the parking area behind the house, Duo's face broke into a grin when he spotted a familiar car. "Quatre," Duo called out as he brought the car to a stop and turned off the engine.

"Hi, Duo," replied Quatre as he walked over to the car.

"Good to see you again. Is this a social call or business?"

"I guess you could call it a social business call," returned Quatre.

Duo scratched his head. "Uh, care to explain?"

Quatre laughed. "Jet is due for his shots."

"Ah."

"Trowa thought you might like to see him as well, see how he's getting on now."

"I'd love too," replied Duo. His mind flitted back to the black Labrador he'd discovered starving in a back shed when called out to assist Quatre on an R.S.P.C.A. case.

"Trowa's up at the surgery, Hilde's doing the consult. His appointment was eleven thirty so he should be just about finished," Quatre said as he looked at his watch.

"Is he coming down to the house afterwards?"

"Yep."

"Come on then, I'll go put the kettle on and we can have a chat while we wait. Heero's gone over to Treize's, something about a new horse Treize has got so he will be home after lunch."

Quatre followed Duo to the house and made himself comfortable whilst waiting for Trowa.
Heero eyed the blood bay that Treize was showing him. The horse was only young, three years to be exact and had a rather gangly frame.

"What do you think, Heero?" Treize asked as he stood the horse up.

"He's got a big frame on him, plenty of heart room," replied Heero as he ran a critical eye over the colt.

"His front end could be a little better, but he's got tremendous power in the hind quarters," stated Treize.

"I'd be interested to see him once he matures and fills out a little." Heero stood back and took a good look at the colt. Standing around sixteen two, the horse seemed to be all legs and nothing else. Heero's experienced eye could pick out the sloping shoulder, short back and well sprung ribs. The hind end was large, showing that the horse would have tremendous muscle power once those muscles developed. The hocks were low with strong gaskins and short cannon bones. The eye was calm, showing intelligence, but with a spark there as well, a spark Heero knew was needed in a good competition horse.

"I'm hoping he will be my future Olympic mount," replied Treize as he led the colt back to the paddock and turned him loose.

"Where did you get him from and has he done anything yet?"

"I bought him through Zechs. He knew someone who had to sell up his stock, not sure why and I didn't ask. Zechs had been out there treating a horse when this guy mentioned he was going to be selling off all his horses and asked Zechs if he could pass the word around. Zechs took a look at what he had and spotted this fellow. He thought of me and mentioned it to me. I went out and had a look. He's not broken yet, only ground work and lungeing but his paces are good and I watched him lunge over a couple of fences. He's got a lot of ability so I'm hoping he will work out okay."

"He's certainly got all the requirements physically," said Heero. "What's his temperament like?"

"Good to handle on the ground, calm and responsive. He's not nasty or mean, but he will try you out to see what he can get away with."

Heero laughed. The colt reminded him of Shini in a lot of ways. "Good luck with him then."

Heero followed Treize back to the stable block and stood to the side while Treize got Tall Geese ready to work. His eyes followed the older man as he tacked up and he couldn't hide the wistfulness in them.

Treize didn't miss it either. "When does the cast come off?"

"Five days."

"I'll bet you can't wait to get back in the saddle."

"Too true," said Heero. "I've missed riding and while I'm grateful to both you and Duo for keeping Zero fit for me, it's not the same."

"I know exactly what you mean, Heero. You'll need to be careful though when you first start back, that arm is going to be weak for a while."
"I know. I'm already figuring out ways I can strengthen it without overdoing it. I'll need to be as strong as I can with the camp and all, especially if I want to be selected."

"Just don't go doing too much with it to start with. There will always be other selections, other competitions, but there's only one you, Heero."

Heero gave a rueful smile. "I've already had that talk from Duo."

Treize laughed.

* * *

Trowa came down to the house once he'd finished at the surgery with Jet. The black lab was overjoyed to see Duo and promptly covered him in wet, sloppy kisses. Duo was equally pleased to see the lab again.

"He's certainly put on a lot of weight, Trowa You wouldn't think he was the same dog," laughed Duo as he tried to dodge the dog's attempts to give him a tongue bath.

Trowa smiled, a pleased look on his face.

"He'd want to have put on weight, all the good food and pampering that Trowa bestows on him," said Quatre.

"Ohh, someone a little jealous that they're missing out on attention?" teased Duo.

Quatre snorted.

"I did warn you, Quat. He's got his paw in the door and it wouldn't be long before he was in the bedroom as well."

Quatre went red.

"I knew it! He is in the bedroom!"

"He has his own basket!" retorted Quatre.

"Oh, yeah," Duo winked. "That's what they all say. I'll bet he's on that bed any chance he gets."

Quatre huffed and went a deeper shade of red. He really didn't enjoy being teased, especially when Duo's comments were a lot closer to the truth than he cared to admit. True, Jet did have his basket in their bedroom. But Quatre didn't want to admit that the dog tried to sneak onto the bed any chance he got.

Sensing his partner's discomfort, Trowa changed the subject. "I hear you've been having a little fun and games yourself, Duo."

"Eh?"

"A woman by the name of Peacecraft?"

"Ah. You could say that."

"Care to share?"

Duo eyed his companions and shrugged. It wasn't as if they didn't know the rough details anyway,
news like his traveled fast in a small town. He was just thankful it had all been settled out of court and thus many people figured that it had all been just an elaborate ploy of some sort. There were those of course who believed the rumor mill, and those who couldn't give a damn. Duo was just grateful that the majority didn't seem to care either way. "I should have known you would have heard the rumors by now."

"It's a little hard not to in this place," replied Trowa.

Duo replenished their mugs and began the tale. When he'd finished, both Trowa and Quatre were staring wide eyed at him.

"Well, I'll be," said Quatre. "That's quite a story, Duo. It must have been something really influential to get Miss Peacecraft to change her mind, not to mention admit she was wrong."

"I wonder what it was?" mused Trowa.

"I wouldn't have a clue. She didn't go into details and frankly, I don't care. At least she's given me an apology, admitted what she did was wrong and has agreed to leave Heero and myself alone from now on."

"Good for you, Duo. If I may ask, how has it affected your business?" asked Quatre. He was genuinely curious to know, given society's reaction and treatment to homosexuals, especially since Trowa and himself were involved in a relationship of their own.

Duo shrugged. "I can't say it hasn't affected it, although not as much as it could have. Yes, I've lost a few clients because of it, but generally speaking the majority of my clients have stuck by me and continue to bring their animals for me to treat. Most of them don't seem to have an opinion on it and a handful of others have offered congratulations. On the whole I think society may be changing its attitude a little."

"Well, that's a good thing then," replied Trowa.

"So, are you two going to come out of the closet then and announce your relationship to the township?" snickered Duo.

Quatre almost choked on his tea, Trowa hid behind his hair, his face turning bright red.

"I think the township has enough to gossip over without adding us to the menu," replied Quatre once he'd managed to get air back into his lungs.

Duo couldn't help it, he laughed and shook his head. "Actually, I'd have to agree with you there, Quat. I think most of the town currently has you pegged as dating Catherine."

"What?!"

Even Trowa looked amused.

"How do you figure that? What are they saying?" Quatre asked, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, you know, the usual. The three of you happen to be quite close, you're spending a lot of time at Trowa's, staying overnight and such. Catherine is usually there. I think they're putting two and two together and coming up with Quatre and Catherine."

True, Quatre did spend a lot of time at Trowa's, mainly due to the line of work he was in. Trowa took a lot of the cases Quatre worked on and rehabilitated them before finding new homes for the
animals. It just so happened that they were also lovers, the one thing not many people knew. With the arrival of Catherine, Trowa's sister, many people speculated on a relationship between Quatre and Catherine. Well, that was fine with Quatre. "I think I'll let them continue to believe what they want, at least it will provide a sort of cover for the truth," replied Quatre.

"I don't blame you," Duo grinned.

The sound of Heero's car pulling up distracted them and moments later, Heero walked inside. Conversation switched to Heero and how he was looking forward to getting back in the saddle, the approaching selection and Treize's new horse.

After another hour of chatting, Trowa and Quatre made their farewells, leaving the pair alone. Once their company was gone, Heero asked Duo how he'd fared at the bank. Duo gave a big grin and proudly showed Heero the paperwork that stated he was now the owner of the property, incorporating all buildings, land and chattels. Heero was just as excited for his boyfriend and showed Duo exactly how much by kissing him senseless.

* * *

The dawn chorus of birds reached Heero's ears and he blinked his eyes open, beside him, Duo continued to snore softly. Heero glanced at the clock: 6.05 glared back at him. Averting his eyes from the clock, Heero snuggled back down under the covers, cuddling up to Duo's warm body and inhaling the scent of his lover. He closed his eyes again and tried to drift back off to sleep for a little while longer. He didn't have to get up for another hour yet and couldn't figure out why he'd woken so early. As sleep began to tinge the fringes of his mind so the reason for his early waking struck him.

Today was the day he would get his cast removed and be able to ride again.

With that thought filling his mind, Heero was unable to fall back asleep again.

He really didn't want to get up either. His appointment wasn't until one that afternoon and once he was up and about, Heero knew the time would drag, it always did when you were waiting for something. He lay in the bed, enjoying the feel of Duo's warm body pressed against him and once more thanked whatever deity was responsible for him meeting the long haired vet. Since meeting Duo and becoming involved with the charming man, Heero's entire life had changed - for the better.

The subtle stirring of his partner drew Heero from his thoughts and he stared down into sleepy violet. "Morning, Duo."

"Morning, Heero." Duo yawned. "What time is it?"

Heero glanced at the clock again. "Six thirty."

"Ack, too early," Duo huffed and snuggled up to Heero.

Heero chuckled softly.

"How come you're awake this early?" muttered Duo. He was too comfortable to move.

"Guess I'm excited about getting this damn cast off at last."

"That's right, today is 'C' day."

"'C' day?" inquired Heero.
"Cast day," snickered Duo.

"Aa." Heero closed his eyes briefly.

"You know that arm is going to take a while to gain its strength back."

"Yeah, I know."

Duo burrowed deeper into the bed clothes. "You'll have to take it easy with it and build it up slowly."

"You reading me the riot act again, mom?"

"Not exactly. I've been doing some thinking though on ways you can strengthen that arm without overtaxing it."

"And?"

"Have you thought about swimming?"

"Eh?"

"Swimming, Heero. It's a good way to exercise pretty much all the muscles in your body and being in water it won't strain your arm as much as lifting weights would."

"Who said I was going to be lifting weights?"

"I know you, Heero."

Heero had to admit he'd given the thought of weights some serious consideration. Only problem was, they didn't have any which meant he'd need to join a gym or something. Either that or re-stack the hay bales, feed bags and anything else he could get his hands on. Now that Duo mentioned it, swimming seemed to be a much better option.

"The town pool is about a ten minute drive from here. We could go there each day and do a few laps."

"You'd come with me?" asked Heero.

"Of course," Duo snorted. "You don't think I would let you loose in the local swimming pool half naked with all those lusting females, now do you?"

"I won't have to worry about lusting females once they get an eyeful of you in your speedos," retorted Heero with a snicker.

"Who said I wear speedos?"

"I've seen them in your drawer when I've put the laundry away."

"Oh." Duo gave a sheepish grin and rolled over. "Guess I'd better be getting up," he said, changing the subject.

Heero wasn't silly, he knew it was a ploy to get out of an awkward situation. He reached out and grabbed Duo's wrist. "Thanks, Duo. I think swimming would be a good way to strengthen the arm again and I'm pleased you would come with me. Besides, I think the arm would get a much better workout fighting off the women determined to molest you once they see you in those obscene
Duo cocked an eyebrow. "I guess you'd rather have me wearing something neck to knee, like they did years ago?"

"You better believe it. Mine!" Heero growled and then lunged at his partner, tackling the vet back to the bed where he proceeded to ravish Duo's mouth.

Duo squirmed under the onslaught and then went limp as he was kissed into oblivion. "Mmm. Now that's what I call a nice way to wake up," he said as he lay there, panting.

Smirking, Heero got up and smacked Duo's boxer covered rear. Duo yelped. "Time to get moving. There's horses to be fed and put out, stables to be cleaned and me to have breakfast."

"And who made you the master?" Duo grumbled, but there was a smile on his face. Heero didn't tease like this very often so it was good to see him having a little fun.

"I did," smirked Heero. "Now rise and get about your duties."

"I'll give you duties," Duo growled and then pounced.

Heero found himself up against the bedroom wall, a hungry vet pressed against him and his mouth being raped by Duo's while hips ground together. He moaned and closed his eyes, pushing his pelvis back against the vet's and seeking friction for the excitement that was stirring between his legs.

The kiss broke and Duo stared mischievously into Heero's blue eyes. "I gotta get moving," he said and walked off to the shower, swaying his hips as he went.

Still pressed against the wall, a glazed look in his eyes, Heero watched that taunting ass as it sashayed away. He groaned. Payback was a bitch.

* * *

"Stop fidgeting."

"I'm not fidgeting."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Then what would you call it?"

"Subtle exercising of muscles?"

"In other words, fidgeting." Duo rolled his eyes. "It won't be much longer, Heero."

"I hope not," Heero replied. He wasn't too comfortable in hospitals, well, the human kind that was, the animal ones were fine with him, especially when they had a certain long haired vet in them. It had seemed like hours since he'd woken this morning. He'd done his best to make the time go by as quickly as possible, but it hadn't worked. By ten o'clock he'd been pacing the lounge room floor, by eleven he'd had his shower and was ready to go. By twelve, Duo had been ready to throttle him. Now they had been sitting in the outpatient section of the Salsbury Memorial Hospital for thirty minutes and no sign of anything happening. Heero looked at the clock again. One-ten. Why were hospitals always running late?
"Mr. Yuy?"

Heero looked up when the nurse called his name. He stood, Duo beside him and walked over. "I'm Heero Yuy."

"Follow me please." The nurse turned and walked through a set of double doors, Heero hot on her heels and Duo right behind.

The nurse took them down a long corridor, passing several doors on their way. Eventually she stopped and opened a door. "Wait in here, please. Doctor Marsh will be with you shortly." The nurse placed a folder on the small bench and left.

Heero walked over to the small bed and climbed on, Duo sat in the chair next to it and gazed around. It was your average examination room, bench to the side containing various supplies, hospital bed for the patient, light above it and an oxygen connection point and mask on the wall.

"I hope the doctor isn't too long," said Heero in an attempt to lighten the tension he was feeling.

"Shouldn't be," replied Duo absently. He had consults that evening, but they didn't start until five so he still had plenty of time up his sleeve. Just in case, he'd asked Hilde to be available to fill in for him if they were delayed for any reason.

Heero sighed - and began to fidget again.

"I spy..."

"Pardon?" Heero turned and stared at Duo.

"I spy. It's a game, Heero."

"I know what it is," replied Heero a little irritably.

"I just thought it might make the time go a little quicker."

Heero shook his head.

* * *

"Basket."

"No."

"Bowl."

"No."

"Bedpan."

"Ewww!" Duo scrunched his face up in disgust, Heero snickered.

The door opened and both men immediately forgot their game. "Mr. Yuy? I'm Doctor Marsh." A tall, slightly balding man stepped into the room and picked up the folder.

"Hi, Doc," Heero replied.

"I see here that you're due to have that cast removed today."
"Yes."

The doctor read through the file notes and then put the folder down and approached Heero. He asked a few questions while he checked the cast over. Straightening up and obviously happy with the answers to his questions, the doctor made a couple of notes in the file and then opened up one of the cupboards under the bench, retrieving what looked like an angle grinder to Heero. "Okay. If you can move slightly this way..." The doctor positioned Heero on the bed and then propped the arm up with a pillow.

"Right. I need you to remain completely still while I remove the cast. This won't hurt at all but it will be a bit noisy."

"Okay." Heero flashed Duo a look that clearly said he wasn't too comfortable with having such a tool near his arm.

Duo tried to give his lover a reassuring smile. The device was really nothing more than a simple saw, he had one similar back at the practice for the same use. Used correctly there was no danger to the patient at all.

The doctor plugged the 'saw' in and turned it on.

Heero shivered and did his best to remain still. The noise wasn't that loud, but the vibrations that passed through his arm as the doc began to run it along the length of the plaster cast caused a small amount of fear to trickle through his system. He took a deep breath and focused on his lover.

Duo moved as close as possible without exposing the fact that they were involved. He placed a comforting hand on Heero's shoulder and squeezed lightly. "It won't take long and it won't touch your skin," he said in quiet reassurance.

Heero turned his gaze to Duo's, silently thanking his boyfriend for the support.

The doctor was quick, sliding the saw down the length of the cast and keeping just enough pressure on it to cut through the plaster but not penetrate any deeper. After a few minutes he switched the saw off, unplugged it and lay it back on the bench. He returned to his patient, looking at the long line he'd just cut. "Now comes the tough part," he said, his eyes twinkling.

"Tough part?" questioned Heero.

"Yes. Now we need to get it off."

"Ah."

Duo snickered. "He's teasing you, Heero."

"Oh." Heero frowned.

The doctor laughed and reached for the plaster cast. "All we have to do now is pull the two pieces apart." The doctor grasped each side of the cut plaster and began to pry it open. The plaster parted easily, the gauze dressing underneath allowing it to separate from Heero's flesh with ease. Once the cast was off, the doctor began to examine Heero's arm, particularly the area where the stitches had been from his operation to have the plate inserted. He smiled, pleased with the way the wound had healed. "Good," he said. "I'll send the nurse in to wash down your arm and then I want you to go get an x-ray so I can see how well the bone has knitted."

"What if it hasn't?" Heero asked, doing his best to mask the fear.
"If it hasn't then we will need to put another cast on and wait a few more weeks."

Heero swallowed. He really didn't want or need another cast, dammit!

"I'll be back shortly." The doctor left and went in search of the nurse.

"Don't worry, Heero. I'm sure the bone has healed," Duo said in an attempt to cheer his lover up.
"It's rare that a bone doesn't heal."

"I don't care if it has or it hasn't. I'm going to be back in the saddle today regardless." Heero's jaw set in a stubborn line.

Duo sighed. He'd anticipated this but opted to remain quiet for now. He could cross that bridge if and when it happened.

The nurse returned, washed Heero's arm down and then took them down to x-ray. Heero couldn't help but scratch from time to time causing Duo to snicker. Heero ignored the vet, his arm had been itching on and off for weeks and it felt really good to be able to scratch it at last. He flexed his fingers, worked the elbow joint a few times, the stiffness making movement a little painful. He also noted the paleness of the skin. He'd have to get out in the sun a bit and see if he couldn't get it to tan again, he'd look quite silly with one brown arm and one white.

The x-rays were duly taken and both men went back to the small treatment room to await the doctor again. He wasn't long, bustling back in ten minutes after Heero and Duo had returned. He walked over to the screen on the wall and slotted the x-rays onto it, then flicked the switch.

Duo gave a low whistle as he studied the picture. Heero didn't really have much of a clue what he was looking at.

"Can you read x-rays?" the doctor asked, looking specifically at Duo.

"Pretty much," replied Duo. "I'm a vet and the human skeleton isn't all that much different to some animals."

"Ah. You can see here where the break was, and that of course is the plate and the pins..."

"Excuse me?"

Duo and Doctor Marsh turned to see an irate Heero glaring at them both from the bed.

"Remember me? I'm the patient here."

"Of course, Mr. Yuy. My apologies." The doctor began to explain to Heero exactly what he was seeing on the x-ray, pointing out the various parts as he spoke of them. "It looks as if everything is fine with the break. The plate and pins are of course still there and will remain there for about another six to twelve months. After that I'd say they can be removed as the bone will have strengthened enough not to require their support any longer."

"Better not go through any metal detectors, Heero," Duo snickered.

Heero ignored his lover. "Does this mean I'm all clear to return to work now?"

"What sort of work is it you do, Mr. Yuy?"

"I ride horses."
"Ah. I can't foresee any problems with you riding, provided you take things easy for a while. That arm has been immobile for several weeks and there's a certain amount of muscle wastage. It will take a while for the strength to build back up to what it was before and the arm will always be a little on the weaker side than the other owing to the break. I'd like you to attend some physiotherapy sessions, they will help to regain the movement and build up the arm again."

"Fine." Heero was ready to agree to anything just as long as it meant he could get back in the saddle again.

"Right. I'll go and organize for a physio to contact you and make arrangements for your treatment. If you would care to put your shirt back on, you can wait for me in the outpatient waiting room. I'll be through shortly with the paperwork you need to sign and any other relative information."

The pair returned to the waiting room, Doctor Marsh showing up within the space of a few minutes. Heero signed the forms he needed to and took the contact details of the physiotherapist, putting the small business card inside his wallet. He shook hands with the doctor, thanking him for his time and almost ran out of the hospital, much to Duo's amusement.

"You're eager to be getting back home, Heero," Duo teased as he unlocked the car and Heero climbed in.

"I just... I don't like hospitals, okay?"

"But you're fine back at the practice and that's a hospital."

"It's an animal hospital, Duo," Heero growled.

"If you ask me, some of the patients in there didn't look to be much better than animals," Duo chuckled.

Heero rolled his eyes. "Just take me home, please?"

"Okay." Duo ceased his teasing for a moment. "You sure it's just the hospital that's the reason you want to get home in such a hurry?" Duo knew full well that Heero was itching to get back on his beloved horse.

"Zero needs to be worked."

"Heero..."

Heero knew what was coming and he wasn't about to sit back and take it. "Duo, I know what you're thinking and believe me I won't be taking any risks. The arm still isn't fully functional and I don't intend to over do it. I just want to work Zero on the flat. I'll try jumping him in a couple of days, once the arm has settled a bit more."

Duo gave a sheepish grin. "I'm sorry if I sound like a mother hen, but I'm only concerned for you. I don't want to see you back in plaster again."

"I know, and I appreciate it, Duo. Zero's not silly, he'll be good and won't try anything on."

If only Heero knew how true those words were and exactly how 'good' Zero would be.

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 43

Arriving back home from the hospital, Duo went up to the practice to see how Hilde had fared and to let the girls know they were back. Hilde had demanded all the details which Duo dutifully repeated, answering Hilde's and Catherine's questions as he explained all that had gone on at the hospital. By the time he'd finished and the girls were satisfied, he felt like he'd been involved in something like the Spanish Inquisition. When he'd told them of Heero's intent to ride that afternoon, he'd found himself with two mother hens to deal with. Now he knew why Heero had opted to stay up at the house and leave him to deal with the overprotective women. If they were this protective of Heero when he'd only broken his arm, Lord only knew what they would be like if he were ever to seriously hurt himself!

Duo sent a silent prayer that his health would remain untroubled.

Knowing that Heero was intending to ride, Hilde offered to stay and do the evening consults for Duo. She could tell it was worrying the other vet and decided that the best place for Duo that evening would not be in the surgery attempting to concentrate on clients when all his mind would want to do would be to see that Heero was all right.

Duo gratefully accepted the offer, promising to do Hilde's morning consults the next day. Leaving the women to their gossiping, Duo went back to the house where he found Heero had changed into his jodhpurs and was preparing to go out to ride.

"I guess trying to say anything would be a waste of time?" Duo said as he observed his lover searching for his boots.

"Yup," Heero returned and finding his boots, prepared to put them on.

Giving a sigh of defeat, Duo's shoulders slumped.

Heero looked up at his boyfriend and gave a soft smile. With his boots now on, he walked over to his partner and cupped Duo's cheek in his palm. "Don't worry so much, Duo. I'll be fine. I'm not silly and neither is Zero. I'm not planning on doing much, just some work on the flat."

"And what if Zero bucks you off like he did me?"

"He wouldn't dare," Heero replied.

Duo chuckled. "No, I guess he wouldn't."

"Duo, I appreciate your concern and understand your wanting to protect me, but I'm a rider, it's in my blood and I have to ride. I know there's risks involved with the arm being weak, but with the camp and team selection coming up next week, I have to get back in the saddle now otherwise I won't stand a chance in hell of making it."

"I know. Doesn't mean I have to like it though."

"If it will make you feel any better, come out to the paddock and watch."

"I was going to."
Heero laughed. "How did I know you were going to say that?"

* * *

Zero stood patiently as his master tightened the girth. He could sense something, but didn't know what. He could also smell something different about his master. It was a smell he associated with the other human, a sort of antiseptic smell, one he usually smelt when the other nice human was doing something inside that room that was attached to the stables. He followed his master out to the paddock and waited while his master adjusted his stirrups and then mounted.

Slipping his left foot into the stirrup, Heero bounced on his right foot for a moment and then swung himself into the saddle. His arm gave a slight twinge of pain as he put pressure on it and he flinched a little. He settled into the saddle, the mount not as soft as usual and slid his right foot into the other stirrup. He looked to see Duo walking over to the large tree in the paddock and was grateful his lover hadn't seen the brief pain he'd endured getting himself into the saddle. Collecting his reins, Heero got comfortable and then applied a light pressure to Zero's sides with his legs and the stallion moved off into a walk.

Heero circled the stallion at the walk, settling himself back into the saddle again and pleased that all seemed to be going okay so far. As Zero's stride loosened, Heero took up a little more contact and applied a light pressure, asking the horse to increase the energy of the walk but not the speed. His hands were light on the reins, although his injured arm didn't seem to want to cooperate a lot. Heero knew that was only due to the muscles being weak from disuse.

Zero continued to walk, feeling the signals from his master through his back and sides, but there was something off about the signals he was getting through the bit. Zero tried to puzzle it out. Usually the contact on his bit was even, unless his master was asking him to turn and then there was more pressure on one side than the other, but the signal to turn was also accompanied by pressure to one of his sides from his master's legs. Right now there was an uneven pressure to the bit but no signal from the leg; also his master's weight hadn't shifted. Zero was confused.

Deciding he'd walked for long enough, Heero shortened his reins again and applied his leg, urging Zero into the trot. The gray drew his hind legs under him and broke into a slow trot. Heero found the rhythm and began to rise to the trot, positioning his body weight and legs to keep the horse moving forwards.

Duo leaned against the tree watching his lover and the horse. Zero seemed calm enough, Heero looked to be concentrating hard. Duo felt himself relax a little.

Zero was still puzzled over the uneven pressure on his mouth and deviated slightly from his circle, unfortunately he didn't see the small branch that had fallen off the tree and he stumbled. The stumble caused Heero to lose balance momentarily and he gave a gasp of pain as he used his injured arm to push himself back into the saddle. Zero recovered quickly from the stumble but felt and heard his rider's soft cry. Instantly, Zero's senses were on alert. He could sense all was not well with his master, then it clicked, the smell emanating from him was the same smell Zero sniffed when the other human had been attending to an injured animal. While Zero was only an equine, he wasn't stupid. He felt the tremble pass through his master's body, smelt the sudden flash of fear and knew all was not well. He came back to a walk.

Duo had watched as the slip happened. He managed to restrain himself and not call out or attempt to run out to Heero and see if he was all right. He trusted Heero to let him know if he was hurt or needed assistance. Given the distance, he didn't hear the soft cry of pain, nor see the wince as Heero used his weaker arm to regain his balance. He did note Zero come back to the walk.
Heero bit his bottom lip as he waited for the pain to subside. As it began to recede, he set his jaw in a determined line, collected his reins again and applied the leg, asking Zero to trot.

Zero ignored the request and continued walking.

Heero tried again, a little harder with the leg this time.

The stallion took no notice.

Frustrated at having his aids ignored, Heero tried a third time, his legs pushing really hard as his voice backed them up. "Trot on, Zero," he growled.

Zero's ears flicked back as he heard his master speak and felt the pressure to his sides. He didn't feel comfortable about increasing his gait. His master didn't feel secure or ride like he usually did and that made Zero wary. He didn't want his master to fall off, so Zero continued at his steady walk, unwilling to put his insecure master in any danger.

Under the tree, Duo's lips quirked into a grin. He could see Heero trying to get Zero to trot and the stallion completely ignoring him. In one way it reminded Duo of how stubborn the gray had been when he'd first started riding him.

"Trot on," Heero demanded, this time he didn't squeeze with his legs, he gave a sharp kick.

The kick startled Zero; rarely did his master ever kick him. He lurched into the trot, finding his rhythm and settling into a very slow trot. He wasn't happy, he didn't feel his master was secure and he didn't want to add to the problem, so he kept his gait as slow as he dared without actually breaking back to the walk.

Heero began to rise to the trot and then sighed. He was getting annoyed with the stallion. This wasn't like Zero at all. He glanced across to see Duo watching them, an amused smile on his face.

Frowning, Heero turned the stallion and rode towards Duo. Maybe the vet could give him a clue as to what was wrong with his horse; Zero certainly wasn't behaving like his normal self.

Watching as his boyfriend rode over towards him, Duo was quick to wipe the smile from his face. He looked up expectantly at Heero as he brought the gray to a halt before him. "What's up?"

Heero sighed. "Something's wrong with Zero."

"He looks fine to me."

"He feels fine, he doesn't feel lame or in any pain for any reason. No, there's something else up with him and I'm not sure what it is," Heero said as he thought harder on the reason for Zero's reluctance to work.

"I can't see anything physically wrong with him," began Duo. "Did you notice anything unusual when you groomed him? Any lumps or bumps on his back or girth area?"

"No. I gave him a good brushing and I didn't find anything."

"What about his mouth?"

"Felt normal when I put the bridle on and you filed his teeth a couple of months ago." [1]

"Let me check." Duo stepped up to the stallion and gently placed his hands on the horse's muzzle. With practiced ease, he slipped a finger into the side of Zero's mouth, the stallion opening up a little
and trying to evade the wriggling finger. Duo glanced inside, experienced eyes roaming over what he could see of the inside of Zero's mouth. "I don't see anything wrong, nothing to cause him to be like he is. If it were his teeth I'd expect him to be tossing his head around a bit."

"Then what the hell could it be?" Heero sat astride the gray deep in thought.

"How exactly does he feel while you're riding? If he doesn't appear to be in any pain physically, how is he reacting to your aids?" Duo felt something tugging at the fringes of his mind.

Heero thought on that for a moment. "He just feels reluctant to go any faster than a walk. It's like he's being stubborn on purpose."

The thought that had been on the edge of Duo's mind suddenly burst forth and the vet grinned to himself. "Heero, think hard. Whenever you have ridden him, he's always been very responsive to your lightest aid. You're balanced and skilled in the saddle, right?"

"Yes, but -"

Duo cut him off. "Think now to how he reacts when you put an unskilled, unbalanced rider on him."

"Eh?"

"What was he like when I first rode him?" The smile on Duo's face was getting broader.

"He gave you a hard time," chuckled Heero. "He didn't want to move if I remember correctly."

"And why was that?"

The proverbial light bulb went off in Heero's head. "Shit!"

"I think you get my point?"

"Yeah, I do."

"If I'm reading this right, Zero's reluctance to move is not because he's in any pain or discomfort, but because he can feel that you're not your usual, balanced self. He can sense the weakness in your arm and he doesn't want to cause you any distress."

"That would make sense," replied Heero. "I'm bound to feel a little unbalanced to him because of the weaker arm and the fact that I haven't been in the saddle for so long."

"That's the only explanation I can think of. He's acting exactly the same as he does with an inexperienced rider on him."

"Duo, you're a genius," smiled Heero as he patted the gray. "I wasn't aware that horse psychology was part of a vet's degree."

Duo blushed. "It isn't, I suppose it's common sense in a way."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Now I have to figure out how to get him to work properly." Heero gave a soft smile and patted the stallion's neck. "Okay, Zero. I appreciate you wanting to wrap me up in cotton wool, but I've got enough mother hens around me without adding you to the list. I have to get back into riding, and you
have to get back into proper work..."

"Hey! I resent you saying I didn't make him work when I rode him," Duo said, trying to look offended.

"Ah, there's work and there's work," Heero replied, the mischief dancing in his eyes.

"I didn't exactly let him meander around, you know."

"I know, I'm only teasing," snickered Heero.

"Just for that you can clean the stables out by yourself..."

"Already did," Heero interrupted with a smirk.

"...for the next month," Duo finished and folded his arms across his chest.

Heero thought he'd better quit now otherwise after the next round of banter he might find himself sleeping in the spare room. "Touché," he replied and smiled.

"You better go work that animal, Yuy, before he takes root from standing there too long."

Heero laughed and gathered his reins.

* * *

"Mail's in," said Duo as he walked back into the house from completing morning consults. He sifted through the envelopes and handed Heero the couple that were addressed to him before sitting at the kitchen table and opening his own.

Heero took the offered mail and glanced at the envelopes. His eyes lit up as he noted the return address on the second letter. Quickly he tore it open and began to read.

Duo didn't notice the excitement in Heero's eyes, he was too busy opening his own mail and sorting it into various piles. Payments of accounts, bills for the practice, flyers for new drugs and veterinary equipment and assorted junk mail. It wasn't until he heard Heero's quiet, 'shit, I'll need to go shopping', that he looked up and caught on that something was up. He raised an eyebrow in question. "Heero?"

"Ah, sorry."

"Anything wrong?"

"No. This is a letter from the selection board to let me know the address of where the camp is being held and the itinerary for the week."

"Where is it?"

"It's being held at the Waybridge property in Fenwick county. They've provided a map as well." Heero passed over the rough map that had been enclosed with the letter.

Duo took the piece of paper and studied it.

"I have the option of stabling Zero there and staying for the week, leaving just Zero there or commuting both myself and Zero every day."
"Waybridge is only about an hours drive from here, Heero," said Duo as he fetched a larger map from the book case and looked up the directions. "See." He passed the map over, pointing to where they were and where the street was that the Waybridge property was located on.

"I think I'd prefer to commute every day," began Heero. "That way Zero is in his home environment each night and less chance of him getting upset."

"He's usually pretty good when you go to shows and settles well," replied Duo.

"I know, but he hasn't had to stay away from familiar surroundings much in the past and I'd rather not risk anything further happening if it's avoidable."

"I see your point. Commute it is then. Now, why the 'shit' comment?"

Heero laughed. "I'll need to get a few more things."

"Like what?"

"A couple more pairs of jodhpurs, spare boots, new jumping boots for Zero..."

"Shit! You are going to need to go shopping," Duo chuckled.

"Yeah."

"How about we take a run into Salsbury tomorrow? Hilde's doing morning consults so we can head off early morning. We can visit the saddler's store, pick up the stuff you need and then take a trip to the pool."

"Sounds like a good idea to me."

"Then it's a date?"

Heero leaned across the table and stole a gentle kiss. "It's a date."

* * *

"How do these ones look?" Heero asked as he emerged from the changing room and modeled the fawn jodhpurs for Duo.

Duo couldn't help but snicker.

"What?" Heero couldn't see where the humor was coming from.

"Heero, that's the fifth pair you've tried on so far and each time you ask me how they look. I swear you will be asking me if your bum looks big in them next."

Heero gave a sheepish smile. "Now that you mention it; does my bum look big in these?" Heero made a show of looking over his shoulder into the mirror, trying to see if his ass looked big or not and trying not to snicker at the same time.

Duo rolled his eyes. "You're worse than a woman!" He got up from where he was sitting and walked over to Heero. Checking that there was no one around, he placed both hands on Heero's ass and squeezed. "No, your ass doesn't look big in these; in fact, it looks positively delicious," he whispered into Heero's ear.

"Ahhh," moaned Heero softly as he shivered with the touch and then gave an indignant squawk as
Duo slapped his backside.

"Get back in there and hurry up, Yuy. I want to go swimming, preferably before I need a rubber ring to keep me afloat."

Heero huffed but did as requested.

Fortunately it didn't take as long to pick out a pair of boots for Heero and a set of jumping boots for Zero. With the purchases in a couple of plastic carry bags, the pair headed back to the car and then to the town pool to go swimming.

Stepping out of the change rooms, Duo kept the large beach towel wrapped around his hips as he waited for Heero to finish changing and join him. He gazed around. The pool wasn't very busy, probably because it was the middle of the week and most people were at work. There was a scattering of people on the grass under the shaded area, mostly young girls Duo noted with a sigh.

"Ready?"

Heero's voice in his ear caused Duo to jump and he whirled around. Heero grinned at him, a towel similarly draped around his own hips. Duo shook his head.

"Come on, let's pick out a spot to drop our stuff and go swimming," Heero said as he grabbed Duo's elbow and steered him towards the lawned area.

They found a spot that was a little away from other people and dropped their bags with their clothes in to the grass. Duo couldn't help but notice the admiring glances the girls were sending in Heero's direction. Duo scowled. Heero was his! The fact that the girls were similarly checking him out didn't register, all he could see was their eyes roving over Heero, and it got worse once Heero dropped the towel.

Duo thought he was going to suffer from sunstroke.

"Where the fuck did you get those?" Duo growled out quietly.

"You didn't think I was going to let you loose in public in your speedos, now did you?" Heero stood with one hand on his hips, the smallest pair of blue speedos Duo had ever seen covering his nether regions.

"They're not speedos, they're obscene!"

"Ahh, but I don't see you tearing your gaze away," teased Heero.

"Um, errr..." Duo flushed as he realized Heero had caught him ogling. "Damn, I'm gonna have to beat them off with a stick," he muttered as he dropped his own towel.

Heero thought his heart had stopped when he got a look at Duo in his speedos. The flimsy, red material scarcely covered Duo's assets, the finely toned body and well muscled legs providing the perfect compliment. Heero noted he wasn't the only one to be taking notice. "Let's get in the water and start doing some laps," he all but snapped as he turned to walk towards the pool.

Duo shook his head in amusement before following that nicely defined ass to the pool. Both men were aware of the burning gazes that followed them and did their best to ignore the lusting women. Reaching the edge of the pool, Duo dipped a toe in the water. "Ohh, cold," he said.

"Wuss," replied Heero with a snicker and climbed on the starting block, preparing to dive in.
Duo simply gave him a *look*.

Smirking, Heero gave his lover a cheeky grin and dived in, sending droplets of water flying in Duo's direction.

"Bastard," growled Duo as the cold water hit his skin. Deciding he might as well jump in seeing as how he was half soaked already, Duo slipped into the water and waited for Heero to surface.

The cold water sent mild shock waves through Heero's body and he surfaced quickly. He spotted Duo standing in the water by the blocks and swam over to him. "It is a bit on the chilly side," he commented.

"At least I won't have to worry about the girls trying to chase you now."

"Eh?" Heero wasn't following the vet's line of logic.

Seeing the confusion in Heero's eyes, Duo moved a little closer and brought his hand to Heero's groin under the water. He gave a soft squeeze. "Lose something, lover?"

Heero blushed as he realized what Duo was saying. The cold water had affected more than just his skin. His cock and balls were doing their best to climb inside his body. He was quick to retaliate though, finding Duo's groin and noting his lover's lack of assets. "I'd say someone else is also suffering from shrinkage."

Duo laughed. "Ah, didn't anyone ever tell you that it's not the size that matters but how you use it?"

"And you use it so well," Heero whispered huskily before giving the vet's groin another quick feel and then swimming off.

Watching the teasing water nymph swim away, Duo couldn't help but growl softly. With a shake of his head, he dove under the water and began to swim after his lover.

They spent a good hour in the water, swimming laps and resting in-between, enjoying the coolness and each other’s company. Duo was still aware of the girls watching them, as was Heero, but they did their best to ignore them, concentrating on their exercise. Duo was beginning to tire and knew Heero's arm must be getting a little sore too, even though the rider would never admit to it.

"I think I'm getting waterlogged," said Duo as they finished yet another lap. "I'm going to hop out and dry off."

"I'll join you," replied Heero. His arm was starting to ache a little, but that wasn't his reason for stopping, no. Heero didn't want those girls ogling his boyfriend and he was going to protect what was his.

They climbed out of the pool, Duo grabbing his braid and wringing out the excess water. He gazed at the sodden mass and sighed.

"Looks like something else has shrunk," snickered Heero when he took in the sight of Duo's bedraggled braid. The length of hair had indeed shrunk and now only reached to Duo's lower back instead of the top of his ass.

"It's going to be a bitch to brush out. I knew I should have put it in a ponytail." Duo had experienced his long hair and swimming before. Although keeping it in a braid meant it stayed out of his way, it also 'shrank' and became a veritable minefield of tangles and snarls, not to mention it took ages to dry. If he swam with it in a ponytail at least it didn't get quite so many tangles and was quicker to
brush out and dry off.

They walked back to the grass where they had dumped their belongings, both men fully aware of the heated gazes shot in their direction and each as determined to fight off the females from their partner should it be necessary. Duo watched his lover appreciatively as Heero bent over to pick up his towel. Those tiny speedos outlined that perfect ass so well. Duo groaned and closed his eyes. It would not do for him to be getting hard when wearing a small pair of speedos himself!

Heero snickered when he heard the groan. He knew full well the effect he was having on his lover, Lord knew he was suffering from the same affliction himself. He glanced over at Duo as he straightened himself up and bit his lip. The water from Duo's hair was still dripping down onto Duo's skin. The tiny droplets joining forces and then running over the milky planes.

Heero quickly wrapped the towel around his waist, covering his rising excitement.

Duo followed suit, noticing Heero's discomfort and swelling of the blue material. His own towel managed to find its way around Duo's waist and not soon enough as Duo's cock began to swell. He sat on the grass, Heero dropping to sit beside him and reached for his tangled mass of hair.

"I don't know about you, but I think we need to get out of here and soon," Heero murmured.

"I'm right with you, Heero," Duo returned, feeling the heat continuing to rise in his nether regions. "Just let me do something with this mess first." Duo reached for the tie to his braid and released it. He combed his fingers through the tangled mess, trying to restore some form of order to it. He knew it would need a wash and ton of conditioner to completely sort it out, but it would have to wait until they got home.

Heero waited patiently while Duo sorted out his hair as best he could. Out the corner of his eye he could see the girls whispering amongst themselves and shooting glances at them. It would appear they were trying to goad each other into coming over and talking to them. Heero really didn't fancy having anyone near his boyfriend and if they did get up the courage to approach then he would have to be polite and put up with their obvious attraction whilst trying to think up excuses to avoid the inevitable questions and attempts to gain a date.

"I'm as done as I'm gonna be."

Duo's words broke into Heero's thoughts and the Japanese man turned to his lover. "Good. Let's get out of here then before the admirers make a move."

Duo chuckled and stood, grabbing his bag and walking off towards the change rooms. Heero was a step behind him and Duo could swear he heard the girls breathe sighs of frustration when they realized they were leaving. Five minutes later they were changed and in the car.

"This is going to take ages to brush through," complained Duo as he continued to comb through his hair with his fingers while Heero drove them home.

"I'll help you," replied Heero.

"Thanks. Next time remind me to put it in a ponytail."

"There won't be a next time," growled Heero.

"Huh? I thought you wanted to go swimming to strengthen your arm?"

"I'll find another way."
"I do believe someone is jealous," teased Duo.

"I don't appreciate females, or males for that matter, drooling all over my boyfriend. Mine!"

Duo thought he'd better shut up now.

* * *

When they arrived back home, Duo headed straight for the shower. He stripped off his clothes and stepped under the warm spray. Tilting his head back, he let the warm water course through the chestnut strands, soaking the still damp mass completely. He reached for the shampoo bottle and poured a generous amount into the palm of his hand. Duo began to hum as he worked the shampoo through his hair, lathering it up and spreading it evenly through the long tresses. So caught up in his task, he didn't hear the bathroom door open.

"Mind if I join you?"

Duo gave a squeak of surprise as the shower stall door slipped open. He heard the words and managed to get the soap away from his eyes so he could open them. Before him, waiting for permission to enter the shower, stood a very naked Heero. Duo grinned. "Of course you can."

Heero stepped inside the stall and took over the washing of his lover's hair, massaging Duo's scalp and eliciting soft moans from his boyfriend's throat. He guided Duo back under the shower's spray and rinsed the soap from his lover's hair before grabbing the bottle of conditioner and squeezing a good sized amount onto Duo's hair.

Relaxing under the ministrations, Duo was almost purring as Heero's fingers gently worked the conditioner through his tresses. Those fingers felt so good against his scalp, soothing away all the tension in the vet's body.

"It needs to stay in for a few minutes," said Heero softly as he finished spreading the conditioner through Duo's hair.

"Any suggestions as to how we can pass the time?" Duo asked, his voice husky. Heero's hands had affected him in more ways than just to relax him.

"I might have a few," replied Heero in a sultry tone and let his hands wander over the slick skin of Duo's back and then around the front of his thighs to stroke through the vet's pubic hair.

Duo groaned and pushed into the touch. He let his own hands traverse Heero's body, mapping out the contours and settling on the hardened flesh between his lover's legs.

Hips began to thrust as each man took a firm hold on the other's cock, steel lengths were stroked, caressed and tormented. Duo found Heero's sac and began to massage, Heero spreading his legs to allow further access and dropping his head to Duo's shoulder as he panted his excitement. Duo was in a similar position. Legs spread, hips thrusting as Heero's hand worked the shaft of his cock with expertise, pausing to rub over the swollen crown from time to time and tease the small slit. Duo's head rested against Heero's shoulder as he squirmed and moaned his approval.

Feeling the familiar sensations spreading through their respective systems, both men sped up their ministrations, each trying to bring the other off as quickly as possible. All thoughts fled their minds as they focused solely on reaching the pinnacle of pleasure.

Duo was the first to fall over the edge, his muffled cries of release against Heero's shoulder followed by the warm spurring of fluid from his cock. Somehow he managed to keep his hand moving and
bring Heero to completion as the strength of his orgasm washed over him.

Heero gave a strangled moan as his release found him. He jerked and shuddered, milky fluid escaping and coating Duo's hand before the spray began to wash it away. They clung to each other, enjoying the wash of both water and pleasure over and through their bodies.

Heero was the first to recover and supporting the vet, who still seemed to be floating in a haze somewhere near the moon, he managed to get Duo under the spray completely and start the task of rinsing out the conditioner.

A couple of minutes later, the water was turned off and they stepped out of the stall. Duo's consciousness had returned and he snagged a couple of fluffy towels for them, passing one to Heero and then wrapping the other around his own waist. A third towel was employed to deal with Duo's hair and the pair stepped out of the bathroom and headed to the bedroom to dry off, change and tend to the remaining duties for the day.

~ * ~

tbc...

[1] Horses are herbivores and eat grasses. Unlike human teeth, their teeth continue to grow for their entire life. When a horse chews its food it does so in a grinding fashion, the top jaw is fixed while the bottom jaw moves in a circular motion. This can often lead to uneven wear on the molars resulting in the teeth growing sharper edges and/or points on the outer side of the molar. This is why a horse's teeth should be checked regularly and 'filed' every year to remove any sharp edges. For more in depth information on a horse's teeth visit: http://www.eques.com.au/health/sept2004/dentist.htm
Chapter 44

Heero brought the car to a smooth stop and turned the engine off. Climbing out of the vehicle, he spotted Otto to the side, tending to one of the horses and headed in the groom's direction.

"Hey, Otto," Heero said as he walked up to the groom.

"Heero. It's really good to see you again," replied Otto as he placed the horse's forefoot back to the ground and straightened up. He slipped the hoof pick he'd been using to clean out the horse's foot into his pocket and shook hands with the young rider.

"How are things going?" Heero asked politely.

"The usual. Not enough hours in the day to keep up with all the work. I see you have your cast off."

"Yeah. It came off four days ago."

"Bet you're glad to be rid of it."

"You can say that again."

"Your arm healed up okay?"

"It's fine. The plate and pins are still in there for the moment until the bone regains its full strength, but everything seems to be okay and the doctor was happy with the way it's healed," replied Heero.

"Any idea when you're coming back to ride then?" Otto had missed the young man. Not only was he a skilled rider, probably one of the best Treize had ever had as a student, but he was a nice young man with polite manners and an air of calm around him. The horses liked him too.

"I should be back once the Nations Cup is finished."

"Good. We could do with you back in the saddle. Treize has too many horses to keep in work by himself and the stable boys aren't proper riders. Oh, they manage to keep the horses exercised, but they need more than that, they need schooling properly."

Heero could understand what Otto was saying. A horse needed to be worked, yes. But it also needed educating; and most of Treize's horses were youngsters in the processes of being schooled.

"There's someone coming to look at buying Sandrock tomorrow," Otto said softly.

Heero's head jerked. "There is?"

"Yes. Some gentleman from down the south wants a good, graded horse for his daughter who is starting to make her way through the ranks. Treize said he sounded okay on the 'phone."

"I hope it works out okay." While Heero really didn't want to see the horse sold, he knew it was Treize's livelihood and it was bound to happen sooner or later. Treize had already told him that the horses he was riding would probably end up being sold, unless they were exceptional and then Treize would take them over at a later date for international competition.

"Don't worry," Otto said. "Treize won't sell any horse without knowing all the facts about where it's
going. He's very thorough in checking where the horse is going and making sure it and the prospective owner are suited to each other."

Otto's words were a small comfort to Heero. He knew Treize wasn't the sort to sell a horse to a bad home. "Is Treize around?"

"He's down in the jumping paddock with Goose."

"Thanks. I need to speak with him." Heero turned to walk through the stable block to the track that would lead him down through the paddocks to the jumping paddock.

"I'll see you before I go, Otto," he said as he left in search of his boss.

* * *

"Steady," Treize murmured and ran a hand along the sweaty neck.

Goose's shoulder quivered under the touch and he allowed his rider to shorten his stride.

Treize sat down a little firmer into his saddle and shortened his reins a fraction. Goose slowed a touch and Treize turned him to face the wall. Three strides out, Treize applied the leg, still holding the contact steady with the bay's mouth. Goose lengthened his stride a touch in response. Two strides out and Treize was moving upwards and forwards in his saddle, arms reaching along the satiny neck to give the horse the extra rein to stretch out and clear the jump. Legs were applied and the bay gathered his hindquarters underneath himself in readiness to propel his body into the air.

Heero stood at the paddock gate and watched the pair. He hadn't studied Treize's jumping style in a while and watching the pair now, he was again in awe of the great partnership between man and beast. Goose had complete trust in his rider and Treize in no way betrayed that trust. They were stunning to watch. The seemingly effortless stride of the horse and Treize following the movements with skilled ease.

Goose pushed into the air, tucked his forelegs neatly into his body and flew over the wall, clearing it with inches to spare. He landed safely on the other side and picked up his stride, cantering away from the jump with his ears pricked and eager for the next one.

Sitting back down into his saddle, Treize drew rein and brought the bay back to a trot and then walk, patting the horse and praising him. He spotted Heero standing to the side and rode over. Dismounting, he addressed the younger rider. "Heero, good to see you. I see you have the cast off. All went well?"

"It all went fine," Heero replied. "The arm is a bit weak from being immobile for so long, but it shouldn't take too much to get it back into shape and the muscles built up."

"Just don't overdo it." Treize whirled around as a sudden squeal came from the side. Goose let fly with a thunderous neigh, almost deafening Treize and Heero.

"Short Duck, I might have known," Heero muttered as he shook his head, hoping his eardrums hadn't been perforated.

The mini pony had been grazing quietly in the corner of the field, only just noticing that his 'mate' wasn't there any more. He'd squealed his protest and then with the answering neigh, charged across the paddock.

Heero snickered as he watched the reunion, the big warmblood nuzzling the neck of the small pony.
that only just came to his knees. "You all set for the camp next week?" Heero asked.

"Pretty much. Most of the gear is sorted, I only have the last minute things to organize."

"You going to stay or commute?"

"I'm going to commute but I'm stabling Goose and Duck at the Waybridge property. It will work out easier for me. I've still got the horses here to think about and I can still work a few of them before I leave in the morning and when I get back at night. I'll take one of the stable boys to stay and look after Goose and Duck. What are you doing?"

"I'm commuting, both Zero and myself. I'd rather not risk anything else happening to either me or Zero."

"Good idea. I'd commute the nags as well if I could, but it will be too hard given the work load here."

"Understandable. It could get tricky trying to get Goose over there if the 'barrel' decides he doesn't want to go on the float."

"It could," Treize laughed at the reference to Short Duck. The mini pony could be stubborn sometimes and refuse to go in the horse float. It usually ended up with Treize and one of the grooms literally lifting the pony and bodily carrying him into the float. "Duo going with you?" he asked as he led the bay from the paddock and back towards the stables, Duck following along behind.

"When he's not got consults, he's planning on coming over to watch and play groom for me."

"I thought the other vet, what's her name?"

"Hilde."

"Yeah, Hilde would do his consults so he could be there."

"He had thought about that, but it's not fair on Hilde, especially if I make it into the team. With the cup being held in Sydney, should I make it to the final team it will mean staying in Sydney for a few days. Duo has asked Hilde if she will cover for him should I be successful so he can come along."

"Good thinking."

"Is Zechs coming with you? To the camp and Sydney if you make it?"

"He said he would drop in if he could during the camp. As for Sydney; I have to get there first, but yes, he said he would like to come and offer moral support."

"I'll bet that's not all he'll offer," laughed Heero.

Treize stopped dead in his tracks, his cheeks turning pink as he looked at the rider. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

Heero simply continued to laugh.

* * *

"Shit, Heero. You going for a week or a year?" Duo asked as he eyed the pile of saddlery, bins, buckets, rugs and other assorted items littering the stable block floor.
"I know I'm commuting, but all this stuff will be necessary. I'll be able to leave a lot of it at Waybridge and just keep the basics in the car for traveling back and forth."

"If you're like this for a week's camp, I dread to think what you're going to be like should you make it to the team and go to Sydney! We will need a truck like Treize's! And that will only be for the gear!"

Looking around at the piles he had strewn everywhere, Heero had to admit, it looked like a lot. He wanted to be prepared though, make sure he had everything he would need. It was Murphy's law that if he had it, he wouldn't need it; but if he didn't have it, he was bound to need it.

Duo wandered into the feed shed and began to fetch the night feeds for the horses, taking them out and putting them into the feed bins. Heero continued to sort through his 'pile' and arrange it into a more easily packed mess. By the time he had it all sorted out and placed in the car, Duo was bringing the horses in.

Once the horses were settled, Duo gave Heero a hand to hitch up the horse float before heading up to the house and dinner. Hilde was doing the evening consults leaving Duo free to cook dinner while Heero continued with his sorting out of clothing for the next day. Luckily there wasn't much he'd need and it didn't take him long to organize it all.

"Got everything?" Duo asked as Heero wandered back into the kitchen.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I have. Mmmm, something smells good." Heero wrapped his arms around Duo's waist from behind and nuzzled the vet's neck as he tried to see what Duo was cooking for dinner.

"It's a beef in red wine casserole," Duo replied as his body shivered with Heero's hot breath on his sensitive neck. "It should be ready in about five minutes if you want to set the table."

Placing a kiss to his lover's nape, Heero released the vet and went to do as Duo had asked.

Once dinner and the dishes had been taken care of, the pair relaxed in the lounge room watching a movie until Duo's eyes began to close and Heero wasn't far behind. Checking everywhere was locked up, Duo followed his lover through to the bedroom and snuggled under the covers in his boyfriend's arms, sleep coming quickly to them both.

* * *

"Shit, Heero. There's no way you're going to fit anything else in there," Duo said as he eyed the packed car. Every available inch was taken up with gear for Zero. "You sure you need all this stuff? You're traveling back and forth every day and you've packed enough stuff to last a month!"

"It's not that much, Duo," Heero stated as he calmly eyed the stuffed car.

"Yes, it is. Let me see; you've got two saddles in there..."

"I may need the spare if something happens to my work one."

"Three bridles..."

"Zero could break something..."

"Three rugs..."
"What if it rains?"

"Two water buckets..."

"One might get a hole in it."

"The only thing that's got a hole in it is your head right now."

Heero sighed.

"What happens if you get a flat?"

"Then I get out the spare and change the tire," Heero replied giving Duo a look that said he wasn't stupid.

"And where is the spare located?"

"In the trunk... Ah."

"Yes, Heero. In the trunk underneath all that lot. I rest my case." Duo looked a little smug.

"I guess I really don't need the spare saddle."

"No, you don't. I'd suggest taking out a lot of the stuff. You're not going to be in need of it all and if something does snap, buckle or get a hole in it, I'm sure you can borrow a replacement from either someone else or the Waybridge place is bound to have spares. Besides, I don't think Henrietta will appreciate all the extra weight and you don't need a blown gasket to the list."

"Henrietta?" Heero was almost afraid to ask.

"The car."

"Oh." Heero looked at his Holden station wagon that was literally jam packed with the gear. Just when had it gotten a name? Heero raised an eyebrow and looked at Duo. "Henrietta? You called my car, Henrietta?"

Duo shrugged and grinned. "She looks like a Henrietta."

Heero rolled his eyes. "I suppose you called yours Fru Fru?" he said as he glanced over at Duo's Ford. "And who said my car was a female?"

Duo shrugged again. "It looks and drives like a girl."

"Eh? How do you figure that?"

"Temperamental."

"Ah."

"Fru Fru, Heero?" Duo questioned. "Don't be silly. That's a ridiculous name."

"Then what have you called it?"

"Camel."

"Camel?" Heero shook his head. He was fully aware of Duo's penchant for naming inanimate objects, just how he came up with some of those names defied all logic. Fido for the vacuum cleaner,
Jaws for the lawn mower were pretty much self explanatory; but Camel?

Duo must have seen Heero's mind ticking over so he offered an explanation. "You've seen the cartoons on the telly, Heero. Remember Yosemite Sam? The bad tempered cowboy?"

Heero nodded. He did remember the character Duo described.

"Remember how he rides a camel at times?"

"Yes."

"When he rides that camel the damn thing doesn't do as it's told so he usually ends up screaming out 'Whoa camel' several times before jumping off and whacking the poor thing with his rifle while berating it with; 'When I says whoa I means whoa', or 'when I says go I means go'. Or something like that."

"You're telling me that you belt your car up the exhaust pipe with one of your tooth rasps to get it to go?" Heero couldn't help himself.

Duo gave him a *look*. "No, I don't. Although sometimes I feel like it. No, what I meant was, my car reminds me of that camel on occasion. There are times when it doesn't want to go, or stop for that matter."

Heero thought that now would probably be a good time to switch the subject, preferably before Duo could come up with a name for the horse float as well. "I think we need to get moving or we will be late. I'll repack the gear if you wouldn't mind putting the floating boots on Zero for me and bring him out."

"Right, will do." Duo walked off to the stable block, whistling as he went.

Heero shook his head. "Camel," he muttered to himself.

* * *

With Duo navigating it didn't take them very long to reach the Waybridge property. They turned down a long driveway which was bordered by a line of eucalypts, paddocks spreading out on either side of them. The manor house appeared before them but Heero drove past it and to the large stable yard behind. Spotting where the other floats and cars were parked, Heero pulled into place on the end of the row. He could see Treize's gooseneck float a couple of vehicles up from them and smiled to himself. Looked like Duck had been cooperative about traveling then.

Duo let go a low whistle of appreciation as he took in the sight of the stable area. It was built in a 'U' shape with stables running the length of each side and the base of the 'U'. Tucked into the two 'corners' of the 'U' were the feed room and the tack room. "Nice set up," he commented.

"Sure is," replied Heero. "Come on, we'd better find someone and ask where we're supposed to put Zero and all the gear."

Duo got out of the car and followed his lover towards the stables. They could hear the sounds of people and horses as they approached. Nearing the end of the closest part of the stable block, Heero spotted Treize coming out of one of the stables.

"Treize!" he called out.

The ginger haired man looked around when he heard his name called. "Heero," he called back and
began to walk over to the younger rider. "You got here okay then?"

"Yeah."

"I'm surprised we did," piped up Duo, "given the amount of gear he's got packed into the car. I thought Henrietta was going to give up on us a couple of times there. It's a miracle she's still running."

Treize raised an eyebrow.

"It's a long story; and no, I'm not going into it now so don't even bother asking," Heero said before Treize could open his mouth.

"Ah, okay then. You wait here and I'll go get Mueller, he's the head groom here and knows where each of the horses are to be stabled and where to put your gear."

"Thanks." Heero watched as Treize disappeared then turned his attention to where other people could be seen moving around the stable area.

Treize returned within a couple of minutes a middle aged man with him. "Heero, this is Mueller, the head groom. Mueller, this is Heero Yuy, another of the team prospects."

Heero took the offered hand and shook it. The man smiled.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Heero."

"Thank you. It's a pleasure to meet you too. Mueller, this is Doctor Duo Maxwell, my groom and best friend," said Heero as he stepped to the side to introduce Duo.

"Doctor Maxwell, good to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too." Duo wasn't in the least offended by Heero's introduction. They'd both agreed on the role Duo would play and technically speaking, Duo was Heero's groom. No one needed to know that their friendship went deeper than 'best friend' status.

"I'll show you which stable is yours to use whilst you're here and where you can put your gear."

Mueller led the way along the side of the stable block and stopped at the fourth one down. "This stable has been allocated for you to use."

Heero went inside, pleased to note the stable was large and airy, a thick layer of sawdust on the floor. Satisfied, Heero followed Mueller to the tack room and where he could stow his gear.

* * *

Thank heavens that's the last of it," muttered Duo as he carried the bag of grooming tools and Zero's summer rug into the tack room, placing them with the rest of Heero's gear. He looked up as Heero entered with Zero's floating boots in his hand. "How's Zero settling in?"

"He's fine. A little excited at first, but that's to be expected with all the new sights, sounds and smells around. He's busy munching on his haynet now." Heero dropped the floating boots to the pile of gear Duo had brought in from the car.

"Heero?" Treize stepped inside the tack room. "Ah, there you are. Everyone is here now and there's a meeting in five minutes at the manor."

"Right."
"It's to discuss the week's training camp, explain what will be happening and answer any questions anyone of us may have."

"Thanks." Heero turned to Duo. "Coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it," replied Duo with a grin.

The three left the stable block, Treize leading the way to the manor.

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Duo took a look around the large room they were currently in. It was similar to a board room, long table, chairs, glasses of water and a sheaf of papers on the table in front of each chair. At the top of the table stood a white board with a marking pen, obviously there for diagrams, no doubt. Duo took a seat next to Heero, Treize sitting on Heero's other side while Joe, the stable boy Treize had brought with him to look after Goose and Duck, sat on Duo's other side.

Heero glanced at the other people filling the room. There were several men as well as a few women. A couple he recognized by looks, having competed against them in the show ring, but some he didn't. Before he could question Treize, the door behind the white board opened and a couple of official looking people walked in.

"Good morning, everyone," the gentleman began as he eyed the occupants. "I'm David Prescott, one of the E.F.A. selectors. Firstly, I would like to thank you all for giving up your time and attending this training camp. The purpose of this camp is to give you all some quality instruction and coaching whilst selecting the best four to go through and make up the team to represent our country in the Nations Cup event. During the week I and my fellow selectors will be observing you all and along with our head coach will select the final team. You have all been invited to try out for the team as your performances in A grade shows have been consistent. I expect that dedication to continue. I'd like to introduce you to our head coach, Lucrezia Noin. Miss Noin will be in charge of all activities this week and has a large say in the final team." A dark haired woman stepped forward and smiled at the group. "I've said my piece and now I'll hand you over to Miss Noin who will explain the program for the week. Good luck to you all." Prescott stepped to the side amidst a smattering of applause and let Noin take over the meeting.

"Welcome, everyone. Before we get down to the serious business of the week's work schedule, I think some introductions amongst ourselves are in order." Noin turned to the woman sitting on her left. "I'll get you to start the ball rolling. If you would be so kind as to stand up and introduce yourself as well as your groom and your horse."

The young woman stood. "I'm Sandra, this is my groom, Dawn and my horse is Maestro."

Noin nodded. "Thank you, Sandra. Next?"

A man around Treize's age stood up next. "I'm Alan, my groom, Thomas and my horse is that big chestnut making all the noise in the stables; Phantom."

The room gave a few chuckles, since arriving they had all been treated to the loud neighing of the chestnut gelding.

"I hope he settles down soon," Noin stated with a smile.

"He will. He's not been to anything like this before, so he's a little excited," replied Alan.

"Next."
“Treize Khushrenada,” Treize said as he stood up to introduce himself. "This is Joe, my groom and my horse is Tall Geese. And no, your eyes were not deceiving you earlier, that was a mini pony you saw. Unfortunately, Goose is rather attached to Short Duck and unless Duck accompanies us to shows, Goose won't jump a thing."

"I'm glad you cleared that up for us, for a moment there I thought the pony was your mount, although you'd be a bit big on him," quipped the young man sitting across from Treize.

Treize laughed along with the rest of the group. "Don't let him fool you. He's quite the dynamo when he wants to be."

"Thank you, Treize. Next rider, please." Noin had worked with Treize before when she'd been assistant coach for the Olympic team Treize had been selected in and knew the man quite well.

Heero cleared his throat as he stood, the butterflies deciding to migrate in his stomach. "Heero Yuy. My horse is the gray, Zero and this is my groom, Doctor Duo Maxwell."

"Nice to meet you, Heero," Noin stated and then turned her gaze to Duo. "You're a vet if I'm not mistaken, Doctor Maxwell?"

"Yes, I am. I run a practice in the next county," Duo replied politely.

"Well, that's handy to know. The team does have a vet allocated to it for the competition, but it doesn't hurt to have one here as well. I hope we won't need to call upon your services other than as a groom though." Noin gave the vet a warm smile.

"Thank you. I hope I won't be needed in any capacity other than as a groom while I'm here either," replied Duo. He noted the genuine smile the coach had given him and he found he was liking the woman more and more.

"Next rider?" Noin turned to the opposite side of the table.

"Alex. This is my groom, Charlie and my horse is Firefox."

"Welcome, Alex and Charlie. Now, our last member."

A woman who appeared to be in her late twenties stood up and introduced herself. "I'm Zoe and this is my sister Carol who is also my groom. My horse is the bay mare, Periwinkle."

As Zoe sat down again, Noin took control. "Now that we have the introductions out of the way, let's get down to the serious business of why we are all here..."

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The meeting had taken almost two hours and Duo was feeling a little tired by the end of it. They were sitting outside on the manor lawn having eaten a lunch of salads and sandwiches. Heero was sifting through the paperwork from the meeting, double checking he understood everything that was planned.

The week would mainly consist of flat work lessons in the morning with jumping or grid work in the afternoon. The riders were to work in groups of three, Noin taking one group while a Captain Dermail would be taking the other. The groups would switch instructors each day so as to gain the benefits from both instructors’ knowledge. Heero, Treize and Zoe were in one group, Alan, Alex and Sandra in the other.
During lunch, Treize had filled Heero and Duo in on Noin's and Captain Dermail's experience. Noin had competed in two previous Olympic Games while Captain Dermail had ridden and trained teams in Europe before settling in Australia and immediately being snapped up by the E.F.A. as a team coach. Heero was quite looking forward to that afternoon's lesson and seeing how the two coaches taught.

It wasn't long before Mueller came to let the riders know it was time to saddle up and meet their instructors in the schooling paddock. Duo followed Heero back to the stables, curious to know exactly what the riders would be taught.

With Zero saddled up, Duo walked beside Heero and his horse to the paddock they would be using to school and train in. Duo let go a soft whistle of appreciation when he saw the impressive jumping course set at the rear of the paddock. Heero's eyes widened a little and a smile crossed his face. Those jumps looked very exciting and he'd love to have a chance to go around the course.

Heero had only started jumping Zero himself a couple of days ago and was pleased with how the gray had gone. He was still weak in the right arm, but it was getting stronger every day. Zero had also figured out that his master was okay and begun to act like his usual self again; although he was still apt to slow and try to stop if he felt Heero off balance at all.

"Riders. Mount up and begin to warm your horses up, please," Noin called out as the six riders entered the paddock.

The grooms moved to sit on the grass out of the way of the working horses but still close enough to hear what was being said and observe their 'charges'. Duo sat with the group, pleased to find it appeared he was accepted by them. He hadn't been too sure how they would react to him knowing he was a vet. People could be funny like that. Some would treat him with awe, others would try to avoid engaging him in conversation thinking he was too 'intellectual' for them and some only wanted to find out all the gory details of his job and then there were those that thought if they knew him well enough they could expect him to treat their animals for free. Duo preferred the one's that didn't put on any airs or graces and treated him as a common human being.

Deciding to keep his mouth shut for the moment and listen to what the others were saying, Duo concentrated on the various riders and their horses. He might not have the experienced eye of his fellow grooms, but he knew enough by now to see how a horse and rider were communicating with each other.

Heero was pleased with the way Zero had settled and was working for him. The gray stallion was calm and attentive, obeying Heero's every command instantly. He glanced across to where Treize was working Goose. The big bay was covering the ground with easy strides, softening through his back and relaxing as Treize warmed him up.

Noin and Dermail were also watching, their eyes scanning over the group as they loosened their horses up. Quietly they discussed a few things regarding each rider between themselves. Both were well experienced and knew what they were looking for. So far they were pleased with what they saw. On the flat all six horses and riders were working calmly, but Noin and Dermail knew that could all change once faced with a course of jumps. Having given the riders a half hour in which to warm up, the two coaches deemed them all ready to try a round of jumps.

"Okay, everyone. Bring your horses to the walk, please," Noin called out. Immediately all the riders brought their mounts to the walk and rode towards the coaches. "Now comes the real test," began Noin. "It's time to see how you all cope over a course of jumps."

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Chapter 45

Heero was pleased with the way Zero was responding to him, the gray listening well. When the coaches called a halt to their warm up and then announced they would be jumping the course, Heero could barely contain the grin. As they headed down towards the waiting jumps, Heero paused for Duo to catch up to him and then let Zero walk on a loose rein.

"He's going well, Heero," Duo remarked as they walked across the turf.

"Yes, he is," replied Heero.

"I'd say the coaches are having a good look at you all while working around."

"My guess is that they want to take stock of our capabilities, strengths and weaknesses so they know what to work on during the week," replied Heero absently.

"Then they have one heck of a job ahead of them," Duo stated. "From what I've seen, everyone appears to be riding really well. I can't find fault with any of them."

"There's always faults, Duo. Maybe you or I cannot see them, but that doesn't mean to say they aren't there. These two coaches have a lot of experience behind them and are more than capable of picking up subtle errors or difficulties even the rider may not be aware of and helping to put them right. The real test is about to come, once we do a round or two of the jumps," Heero replied.

"Then I'm glad it's them out there and not me, 'cause I couldn't tell you if any one of them had a problem, they all look perfect to me so far," Duo chuckled.

Heero smiled at his lover and then focused back on the coaches as they stopped near the course of jumps.

"Each one of you will have the chance to do two rounds. The jumps are set between three foot nine and four foot two. I realize you are all capable of jumping higher and that the cup rules state the fences will be a minimum of four foot two with the maximum being five foot two. The purpose here today is not to see how high you can jump, but how you jump. We will be observing style, approach, interaction between horse and rider; in general, how you ride the course." Noin paused for a moment to see if the riders had taken note of what she'd said. "Good. All the fences are numbered. You have ten minutes to walk the course." Noin left the riders to it, turning to Captain Dermail and discussing with him how they felt the riders had gone so far.

Heero dismounted and handed Zero's reins to Duo. "Would you mind walking him around a little, keep him warm for me while I walk the course with Treize, please?"

"My pleasure, Heero." Duo took the reins and let his fingers brush against Heero's, the touch warming them both.

"Thanks." Heero left his horse with Duo and walked over to where Treize was waiting for him, having handed Goose over to Joe who was also holding Short Duck.

While the riders were walking the course, Duo led Zero over to Joe and Treize's horses, the two men walking their respective charges around.
"What do you think so far, Joe?" Duo asked. He liked the young groom, having met him a few times when he'd gone to Treize's with Heero.

"They all look pretty good riders to me," replied Joe honestly. "I wouldn't like to be the coaches and have to pick a team out of that lot."

"Me either," Duo said. "Guess that's why we're just the grooms and they're the 'professionals'."

Joe laughed. "Got it in one. I wouldn't like to trade places with them."

"Duck's being very good," Duo commented.

"For once he's behaving himself. Probably 'cause he's not too sure of the territory yet. Give him a couple of days and he'll be back to the mini bulldozer we all know," Joe chuckled. "Won't you, you rogue?" Joe shook the mini pony's lead rope as he fondly chastised the animal. Duck simply snorted.

The riders all began to make their way back from walking the course, Joe and Duo turned their charges around and began to lead the horses back to their riders.

"What's the course like?" Duo asked as he handed Zero's reins back to Heero.

"Not too bad," Heero replied. "There's a couple that have tricky turns on them, but if your horse is educated and listening, they shouldn't pose a problem."

"How's the arm holding up?" Duo was concerned as he knew Heero's arm still wasn't back to full capacity and this week's training would be a real test.

"Aches a little, but nothing bad," Heero said as he swung himself into the saddle.

"Be careful."

"I will."

Duo moved closer and on the pretense of checking Zero's girth, gave Heero's thigh a quick stroke. "Love you," he mouthed.

Heero smiled down at his lover. "Love you too," he mouthed back.

"Okay, everyone," Noin's voice spoke. "You've all had a chance to walk the course and inspect the jumps. There's a couple of practice fences to the side here," Noin indicated by pointing in the direction where a couple of jumps stood alone, "I suggest you warm your horses up over them. Jumping order will be; Sandra, Treize, Alex, Alan, Heero and Zoe."

The riders all turned their mounts and took advantage of the open area to loosen them up again and pop them over the practice jumps. Heero waited until the other riders had jumped their horses a few times before taking Zero over the fences.

Zero was enjoying himself. He'd worked calmly for his master, sensing there was something important about all the goings on. It didn't have the atmosphere of a show, but it felt something along the same lines to the gray. Spotting the jumps, Zero had snorted his approval and tossed in a couple of dancing steps to let his master know he was willing. A soft pat to his neck and soothing words from his master told him he would be jumping soon enough and not to waste his energy on theatrics.

Once all the horses and riders had completed a few warm up jumps, Noin called them back to the course. "We do not expect you to be taking risks over this course. The idea of jumping it is so
Captain Dermail and myself can get a good idea of how you perform. We have seen you all jumping at the various shows, but a competition is slightly different to training. This will give us the chance to see any weaknesses or problems you or your horses may have. Sandra, if you will, please?

Sandra nodded and gathered up her reins. The brown gelding responded to his mistress and walked calmly away from the group. Sandra put him into a trot and then canter, circling around once before starting the course. The remainder of the group, along with Dermail and Noin, watched intently.

Duo studied the big brown gelding as he moved. While nothing much to look at in the appearance stakes, it was evident the horse was well schooled and obedient. He also had a tremendous jump on him. Approaching the first fence, Sandra sat well into her saddle, keeping the gelding together, then letting him have his head in the last three strides. Duo's jaw almost hit the floor as he watched the brown horse bound forward and leap into the air.

"Shit!" he muttered and then turned to Heero who was snickering quietly at his side. He looked up into the amused blue eyes of his lover. "What?"

"He does have a huge jump on him, doesn't he?" Heero said softly.

"Yeah," Duo replied as he focused back on the brown. "How the heck does she manage to control him?" Duo asked. The gelding stood around sixteen three and was as solid as a brick wall. Sandra was only a slight thing and reminded Duo of a pea on a pumpkin. Surely if the gelding decided to take the bit between his teeth, Sandra wouldn't have a chance!

"He's very well schooled and she's an exceptional rider," Heero began. "There's no way she could control him by brute force, she doesn't need to though. She's smarter and with her skills can convince him to do exactly what she wants. It's all part of experience, Duo."

"Yeah, I gathered that." Duo watched in awe as the slender woman guided the brown around the course, the horse exploding over each fence in the same style.

"While he's an excellent jumper, he does have a small problem," Heero said.

"Oh?" Duo couldn't see there being a problem at all for the big animal.

"He's not quite fast enough in a jump off."

"Eh?" Duo turned back to Heero.

"He's such a big and bulky horse that he can't change his stride rapidly, or make sharp turns."

"Ah." Duo was beginning to see what Heero meant. Given the size and bulk of the gelding he would have difficulty shortening his stride rapidly or making sharp turns; it wasn't physically possible.

"Don't write him off though. He might not be so handy to cut corners or take shorter run ups, but he does have a large stride and Sandra knows she can take the slightly longer route but not lose much time at all. Also, with the size of his jump, he very rarely hits anything."

Duo nodded. All these technicalities made sense, even if his mind was swimming with them.

Sandra finished the course and returned to the group, patting Maestro. She'd gone clear and was obviously happy with her horse's performance.

"Thank you, Sandra, that was nicely done," said Noin. "Treize? You're next."
Treize collected Goose and headed for the start of the course, Heero and Duo's good luck calls still echoing in his ears. He rode the bay around, loosening him up and gathering him together. "Nice and easy, Goose," he muttered as he ran a hand down the soft neck. Goose responded by tugging at the reins. He was eager to be off.

Turning the bay, Treize pushed Goose into a canter and lined up the first fence.

"He's going well," remarked Heero as he watched Treize jump the course.

Duo had to agree. Treize was stunning to watch, the rapport he had with his horse, the uncanny knack of bringing the animal into each fence on the perfect stride was simply wonderful to observe.

Jump after jump was cleared with Goose's effortless stride. Landing over the brush fence, his ears cocked and within five strides he was bounding over the wall, landing and turning in two strides to meet the rustic rails head on. Treize was grinning, the adrenaline coursing through his veins as his mount cleared fence after fence. Landing over the triple bar, Treize began to bring the bay back to a trot, patting the slightly sweaty neck and praising the horse.

"Great round, Treize," Heero congratulated as the ginger haired man brought Goose to a halt beside him.

"Thank you. He was a good boy," Treize said and patted the horse again. Beside him Duck was straining to get his nose up to meet with his friend's. Joe gave the pony a little more lead rope and the two animals exchanged nuzzles.

"That was a good round, Treize," Noin commented as she made a couple of notes on the paper attached to the clipboard she'd brought with her. "Alex?"

Hearing his name called, Alex rode forward, his chestnut gelding dancing as they made their way to the start of the course. Moments later they were on their way.

Duo gave a low whistle as he watched the pair jump. Firefox wasn't a very big horse, probably the smallest of the group, standing around fifteen one, Duo surmised. But what the gelding lacked in the height department, he more than made up for in his jumping ability. The chestnut was quick and nimble on his feet, clever as a cat for turning and angling fences.

"He's good," said Treize. "He may not have height, but he's an exceptional speed horse."

"I agree," said Heero. "When it comes to a jump off he can spin on a dime and still clear a fence."

With a whisk of his tail, Firefox cleared the triple bar and came back to a trot, returning to the waiting group.

"Congratulations, Alex. Good round. Alan, you're next," said Noin.

Alan's horse was a slightly darker chestnut than Alex's, and also a lot bigger. Standing seventeen hands, the stallion was an impressive sight. Muscles rippled underneath satiny skin and the chestnut tossed in a couple of bucks as he made his way to the start.

"This one is a bit of an unknown entity," Treize said softly. "He came onto the circuit half way through last year and has been doing quite well. Phantom though, can be unpredictable. There are days when he jumps brilliantly and days when he will refuse the first fence for no apparent reason. I have no clue why he's like that and I don't think Alan does either."

Duo and Heero both turned their attention to the chestnut stallion currently jumping the course. It
would appear that today was one of the stallion's better days. He flew over everything, returning to the group with a smug expression while his rider looked relieved.

"Heero?" Noin called. "You're next."

"Good luck, Heero," said Treize.

"Go show them what you can do, Zero," Duo said as he patted the gray's shoulder. "Good luck, Heero."

Heero smiled at Treize and then Duo. "Thanks." Collecting his reins, he nudged Zero into a walk and proceeded to the start of the course.

Zero could feel a slight tenseness in his master and knew this was important. He tossed his head and gave a couple of dancing steps, snatching at the bit in eagerness.

"Steady, Zero," Heero soothed. "This isn't competition so no need to over stress yourself. Just nice and calm will do."

Zero snorted. He wanted to be off!

Heero sat down in his saddle and rode the gray together, bringing his hind quarters underneath and feeling Zero's back soften beneath him. He nudged the stallion into a canter and circled round. Feeling Zero lighten and become more responsive, Hero turned him towards the first fence.

Zero's ears pricked up as he spotted the fence before him. He lengthened out his stride, gauging the height of the fence and launched himself into the air. Clearing the jump, Zero landed and felt his master's weight shift slightly left, a soft pressure to the left side of his mouth followed by his master's leg pushing on his right side and Zero changed direction.

Heero was enjoying himself. The cold, fresh air rushing past his face, stinging his eyes and cheeks, the feeling of the powerful stallion beneath him, ready to obey his lightest touch sent thrills racing through Heero's body. He loved jumping, to have a series of fences before him, a willing mount beneath him and just his skills pitted against the course designer gave him the same high that a skydiver got when jumping out of a plane.

The grin on Duo's face grew wider with each successful jump Zero made. Despite Heero's recent injury and lack of time spent on his beloved horse's back, Duo could see they still had a great partnership. Finely tuned to each other, Heero knowing how much he could ask of his horse and Zero willing to give all he had for the master he adored.

Jump after jump was cleared in Zero's familiar style, whisking over fences, landing and eager for more. The brush fence was cleared with a grunt, the wall and rustic rails skimmed over and then all remained was the triple bar. Heero lined it up, adjusting Zero's stride to bring the stallion in perfectly. Zero eyed up the jump, calculating how high he would need to leap to clear it successfully. Take off reached and Zero gathered his hind legs under his body, stretching and pushing himself into the air. Heero went forward in his saddle, reins slipping through his fingers to allow for the extension of Zero's neck. Forelegs were tucked up neatly against the body and then extended outwards to take the force of the landing. As hooves bit into dirt and turf, Zero's hind legs came back down and the gray gathered himself together, recovering from the jump and cantering away.

Heero rained pats on the gray's neck, praising him for being so good. With Zero at a trot, he returned to where Treize was giving him the thumbs up and Duo was practically bouncing on the spot.

"Lovely round, Heero," Noin said as she smiled at the young man.
"Thank you," Heero replied and brought Zero to a halt between Duo and Treize.

"You were such a good boy," Duo enthused as he patted the gray's neck.

Zero knew he'd been good and promptly began to nose the nice human's pockets for the treats he knew were hiding there.

"Hey! Don't I get any praise? I was in the pilot's seat after all. Zero didn't do it all by himself," Heero said with a grin.

"You were good too," Duo laughed as he reached into his pocket and pulled out the carrots for Zero. "I guess you want one of these as well for your reward?" Duo waved a carrot in Heero's direction.

"No thanks. I'll get my reward later, and it won't be a carrot either," Heero replied with a smirk that soon changed into a chuckle as he watched Duo's face flush red.

"If you two have quite finished, I'd suggest you watch our last member trying the course," Treize interrupted, an amused smile on his face.

"Uh, yeah. Guess we should," Heero replied sheepishly and turned his attention to Zoe and her mare Periwinkle that were currently darting around the course of jumps.

The mare was fluid, approaching and clearing the jumps with ease. On her back, Zoe sat, seemingly doing nothing at all and yet guiding the mare with confidence and skill. The mare herself was around fifteen three, a lighter build than her fellow horses and had the agility of a cat. She nipped in-between jumps, turned sharply and with a twist of her hind quarters, cleared everything her mistress asked her to jump.

"Good round," muttered Duo as he fed Zero a few more carrots, the gray wuffling in delight at receiving so many of his favorite treats.

"She's an exceptional rider," began Treize. "She was in the last cup team and Olympics. This is a new horse though and while I haven't seen it in action before, I've heard a lot about it. I'd say the rumors are true."

"What rumors?" Heero asked.

"That the mare has the uncanny ability to get out of sticky situations and jumps as cleanly as a cat."

"She certainly blitzed her way around the course," commented Duo. "That's enough for now, Zero. No, don't go giving me the hurt horsey eyes either. They won't work... Damn. Okay, one more and that's it."

Sitting on Zero's back, Heero couldn't help but laugh.

"Okay, everyone. If you could all gather around we will discuss a few things before sending you all out to jump the course again." Noin and Captain Dermail approached the group, the riders all dismounting and leading their horses across to form a semi circle around the coaches. Once Noin had everyone's attention she began to speak.

"All of you are to be commended on your skills, your horses are all fine animals and worthy of representing your country. During the course of your flat work warm up and first attempts at the jumping course, Captain Dermail and myself have been making notes on each one of you. There are a few things that have come to light which need to be worked on and that is the purpose of this camp. We intend to work with you on the problems we have found and hope to help you rectify
them and as such, become even better competitors." Noin went on to explain to each rider the faults they had found and what they intended to do to try and fix them, thus making them a more formidable team.

Duo didn't pay a lot of attention to what faults the other riders had, he was only listening to see what they'd found with Heero; and Treize for that matter. Duo knew he was inexperienced, especially when he couldn't find fault with anyone and the coaches obviously could. When Noin got to Treize she patiently explained that while Treize seemed to flow with his horse, he needed to follow the animal a little lighter with his hands. Unbeknown to him, Treize was apt to shorten his reins a little sooner than necessary and thus restrict his horse's head movement and balance.

Treize nodded in agreement, it made sense to him. He knew Goose could be a little fussy at times and wasn't sure exactly what he was doing wrong to cause the bay to be that way. Now he knew, he could work on that.

Heero was told he tended to let his lower leg slip back from time to time. This caused his center of gravity to drift forward and put Zero slightly off balance. In a jump off situation where sharp turns were necessary, Heero would find himself unable to balance his horse quickly enough due to his own position being a little 'off'. It made sense to Heero. A rider only had to be a fraction out of alignment with his horse and all sorts of problems could arise as the horse tried to compensate.

Duo found it all a little too technical for him and asked Heero to explain in simple terms, his boyfriend doing so once Noin had moved on to speak with Zoe.

"Imagine you're giving me a piggy back, Duo," Heero began. "If I sit on your back and remain still, directly above your hips then it's easy for you to carry me, right?"

"Right."

"Now, if I were to shift my weight a little to one side, only a half inch or so, how is that going to affect you carrying me?"

"Ah. I'd be either swinging towards where the extra weight is or putting more pressure on my muscles to compensate and keep myself straight."

"Exactly. Over a period of time, your muscles would develop more on the one side than the other and as a consequence, once you piggy backed someone who sat square in the middle, you'd find yourself thrown off balance again."

"I see." Duo frowned as he thought over Heero's words. Put like that it made perfect sense to him now.

"It's the same with horses. They're the ones piggy backing you and if you're not in the right place then they have to compensate and it causes all sorts of problems to arise."

"Thanks, Heero."

"My pleasure, Duo," Heero replied with a soft smile. "I guess I'd better get mounted again, looks like they're getting ready for round two." Heero swung himself back into the saddle and checked his helmet. Beside him Treize had also remounted.

The coaches called for them to warm up a bit after the horses had been standing for a little while and then they would jump the course again, this time trying to concentrate on the faults that had been pointed out to them.
When Heero's turn came to jump again, the young rider did his best to try and keep his lower leg underneath him and thus maintain a better balance and harmony with Zero. Heero wasn't silly enough to think he could cure the fault in one go, he knew it would take time and while he couldn't really feel the benefit of it now, he knew he would when it came down to jumping against the clock where sharp turns and balance could mean the difference between winning and losing.

Duo couldn't really tell any difference in Heero's jumping, the man seemed to do exactly the same as his first round, but the coaches seemed pleased. Once all the riders had completed the course a second time, the coaches split them into their two groups and worked for another hour on the flat before calling it a day.

Walking beside Zero towards the Waybridge stables, Heero felt tired but happy. Zero had gone well for him and he found he was enjoying the instruction. He and Treize, along with Zoe, had had Captain Dermail as their instructor that afternoon and Heero found himself liking the Captain. He had a no nonsense attitude about him and couldn't tolerate anyone blaming their horse for their own mistakes.

While Treize was an excellent teacher and Heero had learned a lot from the man, Dermail was a different kettle of fish. He really knew how to make both horse and rider work. By the end of the lesson, Zero had been sweating hard and Heero not much better.

"You need a shower," said Duo, wrinkling his nose as he walked beside his lover back to the stables.

Heero sniffed at his armpits. "Yeah, I think I could use one, I'm a little high on the nose. Geeze, I never knew Zero could work so hard."

"Dermail certainly has the knack of bringing out the best in you," commented Treize from where he was walking to the side and a little back from Heero and Duo.

"You can say that again. I think my legs are going to drop off!" Heero chuckled. "But I've learnt a lot from him."

"Yes, the E.F.A. certainly knew what they were doing when they engaged him as a coach. He's hard, but not unkind," Treize stated. "Goose felt like he was going better."

"Zero did too. God, I'm so looking forward to a long, hot soak in the tub."

"Is that before or after you take care of Zero?" Duo snickered.

"That's why I have a groom," Heero teased back.

"Oh, no. No way, Heero. I've got consults when we get back," replied Duo with a grin.

"Looks like there's no rest for the wicked," Heero muttered.

"Nope," Duo smiled. "But I'll wash your back later for you if you like," he added in a whisper.

Heero turned to face his lover. "I'll hold you to that."

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Later that evening after consults, Duo returned to the house to find it in darkness. He stepped inside the dark kitchen wondering why the lights weren't on when he heard the sounds of water splashing coming from the bathroom. He peered down the hall and spotted a chink of light under the bathroom door. With a smile on his face, Duo snuck along the hall to the bathroom door. He could hear the
sounds of Heero inside, water moving around and the scent of sandalwood drifting out to tickle his nostrils. Without further preamble, Duo opened the bathroom door and stepped inside.

Heero looked up from his position in the tub when the door opened. Seeing Duo's form silhouetted, he smiled. "Care to join me?"

Duo's eyes widened at the sight before him. Candles flickered in the soft breeze the opening of the door had caused. They were everywhere, casting a soft glow about the room. Sandalwood hit his nose again, stronger this time as Heero's words reached his ears. He needed no second invite, shedding his clothes and climbing into the bath tub with his partner.

They sat together in the tub, Duo's back resting against Heero's chest simply enjoying each other's company. The oil that Heero had added to the water eased away the aches from stressed muscles, soothing the chafed skin and relaxing both men. They carefully washed each other, Duo scrubbing Heero's back as promised and Heero returning the favor. Once they were both clean they remained in the tub, relaxing and savoring the quiet moment.

"How do you rate your chances of making the team?" Duo asked as his head leaned against Heero's shoulder.

"Hard to say. All those riders and horses are very capable."

"I'm pretty sure Treize will get in," said Duo.

"I think so too. I'm not so sure about Sandra though, her horse could be a liability rather than an asset."

"How do you mean?"

"He's a big horse with a good jump, but when it comes down to speed, he hasn't got it. There's not usually a jump off against the clock in a Nations cup event, but they do set a stiff time for you to get around the course in."

"But if there's no timed jump off, knowing he's likely to clear everything wouldn't it make sense to have him in the team?"

"One would think so, however," Heero shifted slightly. "However, given there's a risk of getting time penalties you really need a team that can jump clear and quick."

"Ah. How do they score it then?"

"You have a team of four and each rider jumps the course. Any penalties are added together from the four to give an overall team score. You then jump a second round and again your scores are combined. Then, the scores from both rounds are added together to give a final score for the team. The country with the least faults wins the cup."

"Is it the same for the Olympics?"

"Yes and no."

"Okay. Now you have me really confused." Duo moved his head to face his lover as best he could.

Heero laughed. "It's quite simple really."

"Maybe for you, but I'm the uneducated one here."
Heero leaned forth and stole a kiss. "You're not uneducated at all. I'd say you're perfectly educated - in all things," he murmured huskily.

"No, you don't, Heero. No changing the subject on me, besides, if we have sex while you're on this training camp, you're not going to be able to ride properly."

Heero pouted. "No sex?"

"It's quite simple really," Duo tossed Heero's words back at him.

"Touché."

"Now, are you going to explain or do I have to wrestle with Nrobbuts and the Internet to get my answers?"

Knowing how much Duo hated the computer, Heero relented. He didn't think he could cope with a grumpy vet. "In Olympic competition you are competing as a team as well as an individual. Again, all the scores are added together to give an overall team score which counts towards the final placings. You jump two rounds and then a third against the clock. Not only does your score count towards your team score, but it also counts in the individual competition. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"My pleasure."

"When do they start to make the selections for the Olympic short list?"

"Next year. The next Olympic games are two years away. Once the Nations cup is over with, the season will be coming to an end. Once it starts again next year the selectors will be out and about, noting the performances and then they will make their short list from there. It's pretty much the same sort of procedure that they use for the Nations cup. Once the short list is selected, they usually whittle it down from there and then make their final team selection along with a couple of reserve riders just in case anything should happen to a team member."

"Ah. Think you have a chance?"

"I don't know, Duo. Let's concentrate on one thing at a time though. We have the Nations cup to worry about first, once that's over with then we can start thinking about qualifying for the Olympic games."

Duo gave a soft grunt and relaxed back deeper into Heero's embrace. He was pretty sure Heero stood just as much chance as Treize did of making it to the team. But he wasn't about to count his chickens just yet.

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tbc....
Duo couldn't make it with Heero to the training camp for the next two days, the practice wouldn't allow it. Consults had gone through the roof and Hilde couldn't cope by herself. They also had quite a few bookings for surgery and it wasn't fair to expect Hilde to carry the load. Reluctantly, Duo remained at the surgery.

Heero did his best to assure his lover he would be able to cope just fine on his own, Treize had offered to help him out and Joe was more than willing to assist Heero as a groom when the younger rider needed the help. Duo still felt bad about it though and insisted that he did all the stable work and brought the horses in so Heero could relax when he got back and settled Zero.

Each night Duo would sit with Heero over dinner and demand a full explanation of what had gone on that day. He snickered when he heard that Short Duck had managed to escape from Joe during one of the flat work lessons and had almost given Zoe's mare a heart attack by barreling his way into the lesson.

"I swear, Periwinkle's eyes were stood out like organ stops," Heero chuckled as he related the story to Duo. "She stopped dead in her tracks and planted all four feet. She snorted and kinked her tail. I've never seen anything so funny. Duck just stuck his nose in the air and trotted right past her. Periwinkle didn't appreciate that and before Zoe knew what was happening, the mare turned tail and fled!"

"Oh, my. I'd have loved to have seen that," Duo snickered. "Was Zoe all right?"

"Yeah, she's fine. I think she was super glued to the saddle. The way the mare spun, I was surprised she didn't come off, but she hung on and managed to get the horse under control and bring her back."

"I'll bet Treize wasn't too happy."

"He wasn't, but there wasn't anything he could have done about it. He did keep apologizing for it though."

"Poor Joe."

"Wasn't Joe's fault either. Duck can be a stubborn little shit at times and he managed to yank the lead rope out of Joe's hand and took off. Joe's got a few rope burns too."

"Ouch!"

"Noin was instructing us at the time and once everyone had calmed down and Duck was caught, she found the entire thing quite amusing too. She even suggested that maybe we should use Duck as a team mascot!"

"Oh, man!" Duo went into peals of laughter. "Did Treize agree?"

"He said he had no objection. Joe didn't seem to care much for the idea though."

"Probably wouldn't seeing as how he'd most likely be the one to have to lead the little demon."
Heero snickered. "I think he's planning on wearing gloves in future, either that or doping the mini terrorist."

"Now, now, Heero. You know that drugs are not allowed in competition."

"I know. Could be quite the news item though if the team mascot was to be swabbed and return a positive swab. Wonder if they would swab the rest of the team then, or simply disqualify the lot?"

"I can't see a team being disqualified for their mascot being drugged," Duo sniggered.

"Stranger things have happened," Heero replied.

"How is it all going though?"

"Good so far. I'm learning quite a bit from the Captain and Noin. The instruction is helpful and luckily I haven't developed too many bad habits. The main area I'm learning from though is the technical side."

"How do you mean?" Duo was genuinely curious.

"It comes down to jumping courses, the way the course is designed, the line, track, approach. How to cut corners, angle fences, save time."

"Sounds very technical to me," muttered Duo around a mouthful of steak.

"It isn't really. I know it does when you're discussing it, but when you get to see it in the practical it makes a whole lot more sense."

"Ah."

"Will you be able to come with me tomorrow?"

"So far I can. Consults aren't as busy tomorrow and there's only one surgery booked for the afternoon. It's a cat spay and Hilde can handle that on her own."

"Great. I've missed having you there."

"I've missed going."

* * *

The following morning saw the team hopefuls all gathered in the schooling paddock, dark clouds overhead threatening rain. Despite the weather, training would go on as usual. Duo had driven his own car to the session. Evening consults had been filling up fast and he would need to leave a little earlier than Heero in order to start on time.

The morning was spent on the flat as usual, the lesson theme being shortening and lengthening the horse’s strides. After an hour and a half, all the horses in Heero's group were coping well, doing what was asked of them with minimal fuss.

They broke for lunch, riders and grooms, settling the horses into their respective stables and making sure they were comfortable before heading into the manor for their own lunch. The staff that were looking after the team hopefuls had provided a hot, filling lunch for them all and both Heero and Duo dug into the thick stew with gusto. It was hot and hit the spot perfectly. During the lunch break the storm clouds that had been gathering broke, rain pelted down, lightning zigzagging across the black sky followed by loud claps of thunder.
By the time lunch was over, the storm had passed and all that remained was a light drizzle of rain. Heading back out to the stables to prepare for the afternoon session, Duo glanced at the sky. The clouds weren't quite so dark now, but they were still around, still raining.

"Doesn't look like it's going to let up any time soon," commented Duo

"No, it doesn't," Heero replied. "Doesn't matter though, you have to be prepared to ride in all sorts of conditions. They don't call a competition off just because it's raining."

"I guess not. I'm going to get my Stockman. You want yours?" [1]

"Yes, please."

Duo fetched the two oilskins from the car and returned to the stables to help Heero finish getting Zero ready for the afternoon's instruction.

"What are you doing this afternoon?" Duo asked as he finished buckling up the last of Zero's jumping boots.

"I'm pretty sure I heard Captain Dermail muttering something about off set jumps."

"Eh?"

"Guess we will find out once we get to the paddock."

With Zero now ready, Heero pulled on his Stockman and did up his helmet. He led the stallion to the outside courtyard area and mounted. Duo checked his girth for him and then followed along behind out to the paddock. He was soon joined by Joe who also had his Stockman on and the pair retreated to the shelter of the trees to watch. Short Duck grazed quietly beside them, the mini pony didn't like the rain at all and was content to remain under the shelter of the trees so Joe could relax a bit.

The trees were close enough to where the instructors were chatting with their pupils and both Duo and Joe could hear what was going on.

"As you can see, we have a series of four fences. Each fence is set off side to the preceding one. Today's exercise is to have your horse responding immediately to your aids. If the horse isn't listening then you won't be able to complete the exercise. The rails are the first fence, from there you will need to adjust your horse's stride and direction to clear the second fence, the brush. We will start with these two fences first and then progress to the third and finally the fourth. I hope to have you all jumping the four fences without error by the time we finish." Captain Dermail looked over the group. "Let's go take a look at the line you will need to follow to get from fence one to two."

The three riders followed Dermail over to the jumps. Standing at the middle of the rails, Heero could see that fence two was about three strides off to his right. Mentally calculating the strides between the two fences he could see he would need to have complete contact with Zero's mouth as soon as they landed over the first jump. Heero began to figure it out in his head. Land, take contact, two strides to have Zero turning, three strides to straighten again and then two strides to the jump. Tricky.

Dermail finished explaining what he wanted the riders to do and then asked for any questions or input from the riders themselves. Treize had a couple of questions and Dermail answered them. Checking that his three pupils all completely understood the exercise, the captain moved to the side where he could observe without being in the way. Also he could coach at the same time.

Treize was the first to attempt the exercise, keeping Goose at a slow canter he approached the rails. Goose was eager to jump but remained obedient to Treize's commands. They flew over the rails then
Treize sat down firmly to bring Goose back to hand, asking the stallion to change direction slightly. They didn't meet the brush fence dead center though, Goose had been a little sluggish in responding and they jumped the brush more to the left as opposed to the center where Dermail had asked them to jump.

"You need to have him more attentive," Dermail stated. "He wasn't completely listening to you on the approach to the first fence. It's imperative you have the animal's full attention before the first jump if you are to take the second one dead center. Right, Heero, let's have you next."

Remembering what Dermail had said to Treize, Heero made sure to get Zero's full attention before even approaching the first fence. Zero was traveling nicely, responding to Heero's lightest touch. Heero turned the gray towards the fence, lining it up and driving Zero together. The rain stung his face and tried to blur his vision, but Heero blinked his eyes and shook his head to clear the water away.

Zero wasn't too happy about facing into the rain either. He didn't like it coming at his face and tried to duck his head, unfortunately his master's hands and legs wouldn't allow him to do that and grudgingly, Zero faced up to the jump.

They cleared the rails easily and as they landed so Heero was shifting his body weight to the right, taking a little more contact with his right rein and pushing Zero across with his left leg. The stallion responded, shortening his stride a fraction and changing direction just a touch. That came into the brush fence, a little too far to the right, but cleared it anyway.

"Not bad, Heero," Dermail commented. "Your lower leg drifted back a touch and that's what caused you to travel further right than you aimed for."

Heero nodded and returned to his place. He glanced over at Duo who was huddled under the tree with Joe, his wet bangs clinging to his face. He gave his partner a smile, and was pleased to get one in return.

Duo was bouncing a little on the spot, trying to keep himself warm. The rain still fell and the temperature had dropped. He cupped his hands together and blew on them, attempting to thaw them out a little. Zoe had tried the off set jumps, but her mare didn't like facing into the rain and had ducked out the side of the second fence. Dermail had told her it was because she'd over compensated for the move to the side and really given the mare no choice but to run out. Zoe had tried again and come up with a better result the second time.

Time passed slowly, Duo feeling the cold more and more as the afternoon wore on. Joe took a walk back to the stables and fetched both Goose's and Zero's rugs, leaving Duck under Duo's supervision. When he returned the two grooms had wrapped the horse's rugs around themselves to ward off a little of the chill.

Dermail had his pupils jumping the four fences now and finally it was starting to come together and happen the way the coach wanted it to. Duo glanced across at the other group and Noin. She had them going over a grid, again testing the horses abilities and education. The grid consisted of six jumps all in a row, two strides between them. The first two fences were low, the next two a couple of inches higher and the last two a further four inches higher. To Duo it seemed all her pupils were managing the exercise with ease. He turned his attention back to where Heero was tackling the four jumps.

Zero was getting a little tired so Heero didn't push him too much, just retained enough energy for the gray to clear the fences. Zero listened to his master and obeyed the commands he was being given, clearing the first jump then moving across for the second, third and finally fourth fence.
"Much better, Heero," Dermail called out.

Heero smiled and patted Zero. "Good boy," he murmured and turned the stallion, intending to ride back to where Zoe stood, Treize having ridden forward for his turn at all four fences.

Duo glanced across to where Noin was shouting instructions to Sandra as the woman was attempting to get the big bay to adjust his stride to the grid. The jumps had been raised, but the bay didn't seem to want to listen. Duo wasn't sure exactly what happened; one minute the bay was jumping, the next he was sending poles scattering everywhere.

Sandra's scream brought everyone to a halt.

Before anyone could move, Duo had dropped Zero's rug to the ground and was sprinting across the paddock to the fallen horse and rider. Noin beat him by all of two seconds, the rest of the team hopefuls and grooms hot on their heels.

Noin immediately dropped to her knees beside the woman. "Sandra? Sandra? Can you hear me?"

The woman groaned and tried to sit up.

"No. Stay where you are for the moment until I've had a chance to check you over and make sure you're okay," Noin stated and then proceeded to check the woman over for any broken bones cuts or other injuries.

While Noin was attending to Sandra, Duo went for the horse. The big brown had regained his feet but was looking wildly around him. Duo could see the animal was panicked and he really didn't want the gelding to try and gallop off. Duo spoke in a wheedling voice, trying to calm the distressed animal.

"Whoa there, boy. Easy does it, I'm not going to hurt you," Duo cajoled as he tried to get close enough to grab the horse's reins. The bay shied away from him.

"Here, let me," came a voice from Duo's left and he looked to see Dawn, Sandra's groom.

"He's spooked," replied Duo.

"It's okay, Maestro. Stand still, there's a good boy," cooed Dawn as she approached the frightened animal.

The familiar voice broke through the horse's fear and the bay turned to see the young groom. Instantly he whickered and stood still, allowing himself to be caught.

Dawn grabbed the reins and immediately began making a fuss of the gelding, petting and soothing him as her eyes darted over the big body, searching for injuries.

Duo approached, keeping his movement slow and relaxed. Once he stood beside Dawn he extended his hand and let the bay sniff at him. "He's hurt," Duo said softly as he petted the bay muzzle.

"Where?" Dawn asked. Given her position at the front of the gelding it was a little hard to see all of the horse.

"Off side hind, there's a gash there. I'd like permission to treat him."

"I'll have to check with Sandra, he's her horse, but I can't see her objecting."

"Okay. Please do it quickly though. I don't like the amount of blood that's coming from the wound."
Dawn turned around to see where her boss was and gave a sigh of relief. Sandra was on her feet and walking towards them, Noin and Dermail flanking her as her steps were a little wobbly.

"Are you okay?" Dawn asked.

"I'll be fine, just a little shook up and bruised. Is Maestro okay?"

"He's got a pretty nasty gash to the off hind. Any other injuries I can't say as I haven't had a chance to look him over yet," Duo said.

"Doctor Maxwell?" Sandra looked at the long haired vet. "Could you? Would you treat him, please? It's going to take far too long for my own vet to get here and I don't want him in any pain if I can help it."

"I'll take good care of him, Sandra." Duo placed a hand on the trembling woman's arm. "I'd say you need to get some rest."

"Right," Noin said, taking charge again. "Everybody back to the stables now. Take care of your horses and then come inside the manor to get changed. Sandra, you're going to take a hot shower and then straight to bed. I'm calling the doctor to check you over for safety's sake. Doctor Maxwell? I'll let Mueller know there's an injured horse coming in and he'll have a stable ready for you to treat the horse in. Anything you need, just ask him."

"Thank you, Miss Noin. I'd like Heero to assist me if no one has any objections," replied Duo as he looked to Heero for confirmation.

Heero nodded.

"I'm and I can take care of Zero for you, Heero," said Treize.

"Thanks."

"Move it, people. These horses will catch their death if you have them standing around for much longer!" Dermail yelled.

There was a flurry of activity as horses, riders and grooms all began to move in the direction of the stables. Duo turned to Dawn. "Let's get him back to a warm stable where I can examine him properly."

"Thank you."

"Here."

Duo looked up to see Heero standing with Zero's rug in his hand. "Put this on him, it will keep him warm as you lead him back."

"Thanks, Heero," Duo said with a smile.

Heero put the rug on the horse and then turned to Duo again. "Shall I get the gear out of the car when I get back to the stables and get it ready for you?"

"Please." Duo was thankful he'd brought his own car that day. Usually he traveled with Heero, but he needed to get back to the surgery a little earlier than usual and so had brought his own car.

"See you soon then." Heero mounted up and turned Zero towards the stables, leaving Duo and Dawn to lead the big bay back.
It was slow going, Duo didn't want to push the horse too much and cause further bleeding. He could also see the horse was favoring his near fore as well. Finally they made it back to the stables where a concerned Heero, along with Mueller, was waiting for them.

"Bring him in here, Miss," Mueller said and led the way to a large, airy stable.

Once Maestro was inside, Dawn set about removing the rug, saddle and bridle, getting the horse's own rug and handing Heero back the one he'd put on the bay earlier. Dawn grabbed a couple of towels as well and with Mueller holding the gelding still, Dawn and Heero began to dry the horse off as best they could. Duo had moved directly to the cut leg and begun to examine it. The cut went deep, but as far as Duo could tell, no major blood vessels had been severed. Satisfied that it would just be a stitching job, Duo turned his attention to the front leg Maestro had been favoring.

He ran his skilled hands down the leg from the forearm to the fetlock, noting the heat as well as any tenderness. Picking up the foreleg, he checked the hoof, pressed and prodded in a few places along the cannon bone, fetlock and coronet before setting the hoof down again. Heero and Dawn had finished drying off the bay and Dawn was reaching for the rug to put on the shivering horse. Doing up the straps, she turned to face Duo.

"What's the verdict, Doctor Maxwell?"

Duo stepped back and considered his words before speaking. "The hind leg needs to be stitched. He's been lucky in that he didn't cut any major blood vessels or damage any tendons or ligaments. I'd say he's either caught the back of the front shoe and split the cannon open, or he's knocked it on one of the poles and the force has split the skin. Either way he's a lucky boy and it just needs cleaning and stitching. The foreleg, from what I can tell, is just bruised. There isn't any swelling of the tendons, ligaments or muscles so I'm pretty sure he's just given it a nasty knock. He will be out of action though for at least three to four weeks, depending on how bad the bruising is."

"Right," Dawn replied. "Would you treat him, Doctor Maxwell?"

"Of course," Duo smiled. "Can you tell me when he had his last tetanus injection?"

"He had his booster last year," Dawn replied.

"Good. He should be fine then. Right, Heero, could you please get me the fine surgical silk, bottle of penicillin, local anesthetic, scissors, needles and syringe? I see you've already brought in the betadine, swabs and a bandage."

"Will do," Heero replied and left to get the requested items.

"Mr. Mueller, would you be so kind as to fetch me a bowl of warm water? Oh, you don't by chance have a crush here on the property, do you?"

"I'm sorry, we don't have a crush," replied Mueller.

"That's okay. Thought I'd ask as it would make the job easier. Not to worry though, I'm sure Dawn is capable of keeping him still. I can always give him a sedative if the need arises," Duo said and then began to peel off his Stockman and toss it over the stable door.

Mueller disappeared to get the bowl of warm water, returning the same time Heero did with the requested items from Duo's car. Duo set everything out and pulled on a pair of latex gloves.
"Can you hold him as still as possible, Dawn, I'm going to clean out the wound."

"Will do." Dawn took a firm hold on the lead rope and spoke soothingly to the horse.

Duo tipped a generous amount of the betadine into the warm water and taking up a piece of cotton wool, he began the task of cleaning out the grass, mud and debris from the wound site. The big bay stood quietly at first, but then began to fidget. "Heero, can you fill a syringe with 10cc of local anesthetic, please? I need to get into the wound itself and he's not going to like it. I'd rather numb the area now than risk him going up on his hind legs and possibly doing more damage to himself."

Heero nodded and did as Duo asked. He handed the syringe to Duo, the vet taking it and beginning to inject around the wound site. He'd only managed two shots when the bay decided he didn't want anyone fiddling around his leg and kicked out. Duo felt the breeze as it whizzed past him and ducked back on reflex.

"Shit! Duo? You okay?" Heero asked as he saw the hind leg kick out.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Duo replied, a little shakily. It had been a near miss.

"Maestro! That's enough!" Dawn growled and gave the bay a whack to the neck. The smack didn't hurt the big horse, but it did make him look sheepishly at the slender groom. "I'm sorry, Doctor Maxwell. He's normally not like this, he's generally a big softie. Are you okay?"

"It's all right, Dawn. He's a little sore and I can quite understand the reaction. I'll try again, but if he continues to try and kick, I'll have no choice but to sedate him." Duo picked up the needle and syringe and tried again to inject the local anesthetic. This time the point of the needle barely touched the skin when the bay lashed out again. This time Duo wasn't as quick off the mark and the hoof caught him a glancing blow to the top of his thigh.

"Fuck! That hurt!" cried Duo as he dropped the needle and grabbed his thigh. Heero was immediately beside him.

"Shit, Duo! You okay? Where did he get you? Did he break anything? Are you bleeding?" The questions tumbled out of Heero's mouth as he desperately sought to reassure himself that Duo wasn't seriously hurt.

Duo flopped down into the stable bedding, still clutching his thigh and waiting for the pain to subside. Dawn was busy telling the bay off while Heero hovered protectively over the vet, doing his best not to grab Duo's pants and slide them off him to check out the damage. Duo knew he needed to see what injury had been caused, but he wasn't about to remove his pants when a woman was around.

"Doctor Maxwell, I'm so sorry," Dawn apologized, obviously distraught at what had happened. "I didn't think he would kick again, he's not normally like this. Are you all right?"

"It's okay, Dawn. It's not your fault. Hazard of the job and all that," Duo did his best to give the woman a reassuring smile, but it turned into a grimace as he tried to stand. "I'll just pop into the next stable and make sure everything's okay. Heero? Would you mind?"

Heero stepped over to his lover and assisted the vet out of the bay's stable and into the adjoining, empty one. Once inside, Duo dropped his pants and examined the thigh, Heero right beside him, so close that Duo could feel the rider's hot breath against his flesh.

"Heero? Do you have to get so close?"
"Ah, sorry," Heero replied sheepishly. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Duo smiled and then began to check his thigh out. He carefully prodded around the muscle, hissing when he hit a tender spot. He flexed his knee, ankle and foot. "Nothing appears to be broken and the skin isn't cut either. I'd say I'm just bruised."

"You were damn lucky!" Heero whistled through his teeth. "A couple of inches higher and you would have been singing soprano for some time."

Duo's eyes widened as he took another look at how close the hoof had come to reaching his family jewels. "Fuck!"

"More like 'no more fuck' if it had been any higher," Heero mused.

Duo smacked Heero upside of the head. "Is that all you can think of?"

Heero looked suitably sorry. "Shall I kiss it better for you?"

"Later. Right now I have a horse to stitch up."

"Duo, you can't go back in there and stitch, not after what that horse has done. You could get seriously injured," Heero protested.

"Heero, I have to treat him. Don't worry, I'm going to give him a sedative and apply a twitch if I have to," [2]

Heero knew better than to argue. Carefully, he helped Duo pull his pants back up and then assisted him back into the stable where an anxious Dawn was waiting. Before Dawn could open her mouth, Duo got in first.

"I'm okay, just bruising. But I'm going to give him a sedative."

Dawn nodded.

"Heero, can you fill the syringe with 20ccs of the usual?"

Heero filled a fresh syringe with the sedative Duo usually used and handed it to the vet. Duo swabbed an area on the bay's neck and quickly injected the drug. Within five minutes, Maestro was swaying on his feet, a glazed look in his eye.

"Now to finish the job," Duo muttered. Heero handed him a new syringe with the local anesthetic in it and Duo quickly finished off injecting around the wound. The bay never moved. Once Duo deemed the area to be numb, he continued to swab the cut, cleaning out the rest of the foreign matter and then stitching the wound closed. Heero handed needle, scissors and re-threaded the used needles as Duo needed them. It didn't take long to stitch and once done, Duo stepped back to admire his handiwork. A neat row of stitches replaced the ugly gash from earlier.

"Now to bandage it," Duo said and took the offered gauze and bandage from Heero. As he wrapped the wound site, he spoke to the groom. "The bandage will need to be changed in two days time, then every day thereafter for eight days. The stitches can come out in ten days time and the wound should be left to the air then. I'll give him a shot of penicillin as well and he will need a shot twice a day for seven days. One in the morning and one at night. Now, I'll bandage up that foreleg."

Once Duo was completely finished, he wrote down the instructions for Dawn and handed her the antibiotic as well as needles and syringes. My number is on there as well. If you have any problems
with him in the next twenty-four hours, call me. Once you get him back home and have your usual vet look at him, pass on my number to him and get him to give me a call, then I can explain to him what treatment I've prescribed as well as what I've done to treat him."

"Thank you, Doctor Maxwell. I'm really grateful to you and I'm so sorry he acted like an idiot. I can't believe he kicked you!"

"Don't worry about it, Dawn. It's not your fault and I know this job can be dangerous. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to be going." Duo glanced at his watch. "I've got consults back at my practice in an hour."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure." Duo hobbled out of the stable, Heero having picked up all the supplies they'd used and dumped the rubbish in the trash before carting the rest back to Duo's car.

Heero grabbed his partner by the arm as Duo went to get into the car. "Are you okay to drive?"

"I'll be fine, Heero. The horse caught me on the left thigh, my car is an automatic so I only need my right leg to operate the brake and accelerator."

"Please call the doctor when you get back and have her take a look at your leg?"

Duo sighed. "Okay. I'll call Doctor Po and see if she can call in tonight. I really have to get going now, Heero, otherwise I'm not going to make evening consults."

"I'm sure Hilde can do them, you're injured."

"Heero, it's only bruising. I'll be fine." Duo didn't want to admit his thigh was throbbing like a bitch and all he wanted to do was sit down and take the weight off it.

Seeing the stubborn set to Duo's jaw, Heero gave in - for the moment. "Okay. I'll go talk to Noin and let her know what's happened regarding Maestro, then I'll pack up my gear, load Zero and see you back home."

"Thanks, Heero." With no one around, Duo took a chance and kissed his lover. "See you soon."

"You can count on it," Heero replied with a smile. Watching the vet drive off, Heero turned around and went towards the manor to let Noin, Dermail and the other team hopefuls know what had happened with Maestro.

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tbc........

[1] Stockman: This is an oilskin, waterproof coat that the stockmen in the outback usually wear. It protects from wind and rain. Those of you that may have seen the movie 'The Man From Snowy River' will recall that the stockmen in this movie wore coats to protect themselves in the Australian high country. These are the 'stockman' coats and get their name from the men who originally developed and wore them. There are several 'copies' available on the market today, the most prominent one being called 'Driza-Bone'. However, nothing can replace or is as good as the original 'Stockman'.

For more info on how this coat came to be as well as what it looks like go here:
[2] Twitch: This is a device that can be made from a piece of twine secured to a piece of wood or plastic pipe which is applied to the end of the horse's nose and tightened by twisting the twine around the upper muzzle. It's used to restrain horses during treatment. To see what a twitch looks like when applied correctly to a horse go here and scroll down about half way to where it says 'Applying a twitch'.
Chapter 47

When Duo arrived back at the practice and went to get out of his car, he found his thigh had stiffened quite a bit and it took him a few moments to extract himself from the vehicle. He managed to totter inside the house and headed straight for the bathroom. While the water heated up, Duo removed his clothing and took a good look at the injury. A deep purple bruise was forming on his creamy skin, mottling blue and red in places. He whistled through his teeth as he realized again just how close the kick had come to his groin. He stepped into the shower and began the task of washing himself off, the heat of the water taking some of the stiffness from his muscles.

Once clean, Duo quickly towelled off and reached for the medicine cabinet. He took a couple of strong painkillers to ease the throbbing then fished around until he found the jar of ointment he remembered being in there. Gently he applied some to his thigh. Duo had his doubts as to how much good the ointment would do; Tincture of Arnica was an age old remedy for bruises, sprains and the like, but it hadn't really been proven how effective it was. At least it wouldn't do any harm. What he really needed was to put an ice pack on it, but he didn't have the time. Fetching clean clothes out of his closet, Duo got dressed ready for consults.

* * *

Heero watched as his lover departed and then went to check on Zero. Joe was just finishing up with the gray, checking the stallion's rug was on properly and that the horse was comfortable.

"Thanks, Joe," Heero said as he stepped into the stable and pulled gently at Zero's ears, the gray not taking much notice, he was too busy demolishing his haynet.

"My pleasure, Heero. How's the brown?"

"He should recover well. The wound wasn't deep and missed the major blood vessels; Duo stitched him up," replied Heero absently.

"I heard a bit of a ruckus coming from inside the stable, everything okay?"

"Maestro didn't want to be stitched. He kicked and caught Duo on the thigh."

"Shit! Is he all right?" Joe's voice was full of concern. He'd developed quite a friendship with the long haired vet.

"Just bruising that we can tell. He's gone back home to the practice as he's got consults to do, I have asked him to call the doctor though and get checked out."

"Never rains, it bloody pours!" muttered Joe.

"You can say that again," Heero replied with a glance outside into the stable block courtyard where the rain was continuing to pelt down.

Joe shook his head. "That wasn't quite what I meant."

Heero snickered. "I know."

"You going up to the manor before leaving?"
"Yes. I need to let Miss Noin know what's gone on with Maestro, although Dawn's probably told her already. Also I want to see how Sandra is and check on tomorrow's schedule."

"I'll come up with you, I've finished off here. Goose and Duck are fed and happy so I don't need to do anything more for them until later. I'll give you a hand when you're ready to leave to put your gear in the car and load Zero on."

"Thanks, Joe."

* * *

Hair neatly braided and fully dressed, Duo hobbled back to the kitchen and prepared to go up to the surgery in readiness for evening consults.

"Damn! I almost forgot," he said to the kitchen walls and back tracked to the phone. He dialed Doctor Po's surgery number and waited for the call to connect.

"Doctor Po's surgery."

"Hi, Charmaine, it's Doctor Maxwell calling. I wonder if I would be able to get Doctor Po to make a house call when she's finished this evening?"

"Let me check for you, Doctor Maxwell."

Duo held the line and listened to the rustling of paper as Charmaine checked the appointments book.

"Doctor Po has a couple of scheduled house calls to make, so the earliest she would be able to see you would be around seven thirty this evening. Is that too late?"

"That would be perfect, Charmaine."

"Right. I've put you in for seven thirty."

"Thanks, Charmaine. How's your cat doing?"

"Oh, Doctor Maxwell, Cuddles is just perfect. Her coat is almost back to normal, thick and glossy again. I can't thank you enough."

"It was my pleasure. Thanks, Charmaine, I better get going now, consults of my own," Duo chuckled.

"I understand. Bye."

"Bye." Duo hung up the 'phone and allowed his mind to briefly wander back to when Charmaine, Doctor Po's secretary, had brought her prize Persian cat in, almost hysterical at the feline's state. The thick, glossy coat was coming out by the handful, leaving the cat almost bald in places. Duo had placated the woman, checked the cat over and diagnosed a thyroid deficiency. A course of tablets and Cuddles' coat had begun to regrow, just as thick and glossy as it had been before.

Glancing at the clock, Duo started. He had ten minutes before consults began. Trying to ignore the throbbing in his thigh, Duo hobbled out of the house and up the path to the surgery where he knew he would have another battle on his hands; this time with Catherine and Hilde.

* * *

Heero found the rest of the group in what had been dubbed the 'social room' in the manor.
Immediately he walked into the room he was bombarded by questions from all the other riders and grooms. Holding his hands up in the air in surrender, Heero managed to silence the crowd.

"Doctor Maxwell has stitched up Maestro and while the cut wasn't deep and missed anything vital, Maestro will be out of action for several weeks. He is expected to make a full recovery though."

Various comments flew around the room: "I'm glad it isn't too serious. I hope he will jump again. Poor Sandra, I know how much she wanted to get into the team." All the people present could feel for the woman, they'd all experienced similar 'accidents' during their careers, things that happened when you least expected them and usually when you had a major competition coming up. It was just one of those things. As the saying in the equine world went; 'One minute you're up and the next you're down.'

It was comforting to know though that you had your fellow equestrians' support when life threw its curve balls in your direction. Heero felt warmed at the obvious concern amongst the riders and grooms. This was another reason he enjoyed the sport so much. Regardless of whether you won or lost, everyone supported each other.

"How is Sandra?" Heero asked, noting the absence of Noin and Dermail.

"The doctor is seeing her now," replied Zoe. "Noin and Dermail are with her, waiting to hear what the doc has to say."

"We should be getting word very soon," chimed in Alex.

"Yeah, the doc went through to see Sandra about twenty minutes ago so it shouldn't be too much longer before we hear something," added Alan.

Treize moved across to where Heero was standing. Joe had spoken to him when they came into the room and Treize wanted to know for his own reassurance that what Joe had told him of Duo's accident was true and that the vet was okay. Knowing that neither Heero nor Duo would like the kick to become common knowledge yet, although it was inevitable that it would, especially once Dawn returned from seeing how Sandra was, Treize touched Heero lightly on the arm.

Heero turned at the touch and his eyes alighted on Treize.

"I think you could do with a hot drink, Heero. Come on, I'll take you through to the kitchen where I'm sure the cook won't mind making a cup of coffee for you."

"Thanks, Treize. That would be nice." Heero allowed Treize to lead him from the room, stepping out into the hall and making their way to the kitchens.

"Joe told me that Duo got kicked. Is he really all right?"

Heero sighed and stopped in his tracks. Leaning against the wall he looked into Treize's eyes, his voice shaking a little as he spoke. "Yes, he did cop a kick to the thigh, a pretty nasty one too. There doesn't appear to be anything broken, just bruising from what I could tell. He's limping quite a bit and I made him promise to call the doctor when he got back and get it looked at."

"But you think there's more to it?" Treize smiled kindly at Heero. He could understand the young rider's concerns.

"I'm not sure. Duo insists that he's okay, that it's just bruising, but..."

"Kicks can be nasty things. I know, I've suffered a few in my time, as have you, I'm guessing. I'm
sure he will be okay though, you have to trust him on this, Heero.”

"I know. I don't like seeing him get hurt though, especially as he was only treating the horse because it would take too long for Sandra's vet to get here."

"Heero?"

"Hai?"

"The Duo Maxwell I know would have treated that horse regardless. He's not the sort to stand back and let an animal suffer when he knows he can help. I can speak from personal experience on that.” Treize's mind wandered back to Taurus and he had to swallow the lump in his throat.

"No, he isn't, he'd do whatever he could,” Heero replied softly.

"Come on, let's get you that hot drink, then you can speak with Noin and Dermail. I'm sure you're eager to get back home and check on Duo and the sooner you speak with the coaches, the sooner you can get going.” Treize began to walk towards the kitchen again, Heero following.

* * *

Duo managed to enter the practice through the back door undetected. He stuck his head out into the corridor and could hear the voices of Catherine and Hilde in the reception area. Quietly he snuck along the corridor, intending to stop inside the consulting room to catch his breath and summon enough courage to walk properly before venturing into the lioness' den. The painkillers were starting to kick in and the throbbing had eased a little, but it was still hard to walk properly. Just as he was beginning to pat himself on the back for having made it this far without detection, Hilde stepped out of the reception room and caught him. Duo tried to duck inside, attempting to walk normally, but Hilde had already noticed.

"Duo! You're back. I was beginning to wonder if I would be doing the evening consults as well," she said and then her eyes narrowed. "Why are you limping?"

"Did you say Doctor Maxwell was limping?" Catherine appeared behind Hilde.

"I'm not limping," Duo said defensively and tried to edge into the consulting room.

"Yes, you are," Hilde stated.

"Oh, are you okay, Doctor Maxwell? What happened? Where's Heero?" Catherine added her own voice to the mix.

Duo sighed. He wasn't going to get out of this one any time soon. "I'm okay," he began. "There was a fall at the camp..."

"A fall? Heero's okay, isn't he? What about Zero? Oh no, don't tell me Heero came off and is injured again," Hilde started to rant.

"Heero is fine and so is Zero. They should be home soon. Heero wasn't the one that fell, one of the other riders, Sandra, took a nasty tumble over one of the fences."

"Is she okay? What about her horse?" Catherine interrupted this time.

"Ladies, if you will both kindly shut up for a moment, I'll tell you what happened," Duo said in his 'patient' voice.
"Sorry." Both Hilde and Catherine looked a little sheepish.

"I don't know what the damage to the rider is, although I'm sure it isn't serious. She did get knocked out so I'm assuming concussion is on the cards, but there weren't any broken bones that I know of. Her horse did suffer bruising to the foreleg and a nasty gash to his off hind. I was cleaning the area and injecting a local anesthetic so I could stitch him up when he objected and kicked me."

"Oh!" Catherine's hand flew to her mouth.

"Where did he get you? Have you had it looked at?" Hilde was more direct.

"He caught me on the thigh, it's only bruising that I can tell and I have made an appointment with Doctor Po for her to check it out after consults."

"Duo! You should get it looked at now, not wait. You could be seriously hurt. Come on, into the consulting room and let's have a look at it," Hilde said and grabbed Duo by the arm.

Before Duo could protest, Hilde had him by the arm and was pulling him into the consulting room, her hands going for his pants with the intent of checking out the wound site.

"Hilde!" Duo squeaked as he made a grab for his pants and swatted the other vet's hand away.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm only checking out the injury," came the reply.

"Over my dead body!"

"Duo, you're injured, it needs to be looked at and I am a doctor, a professional."

"Hilde, you're an animal doctor, not a human one."

"Minor point."

"There's no way you're getting into my pants."

"You haven't got anything I haven't seen before."

"Maybe on tom cats, but I'm a little different!"

"Same thing."

"No way! You're not getting a look and that's final!" Duo grabbed the cloth of his pants possessively and glared at the other vet.

Catherine had watched the verbal 'tennis' match with an amused smile on her face. "I think he means it, Hilde. Better leave it be, I don't think Heero would be too impressed to know you'd been trying to feel up his boyfriend."

"What?!" Hilde spluttered and began to turn red. "I wasn't..."

"Sure, sure," Duo teased. "You just wanted to get in a quick eyeful and grope."

"I do not!"

"Pull the other leg, it plays 'Jingle Bells'."
Hilde had been reduced to sputtering and Catherine couldn't help but laugh.

Duo glanced at the clock. "As much as I'd love to stay and discuss this little attempt at getting me naked, I have consults waiting." Duo moved to the back of the door and took his white coat from the peg it was hanging on.

Knowing there was nothing else she could do or say, and feeling a little embarrassed, Hilde followed Catherine back into the reception area and collected her things ready to go home.

With the white coat now in place and stethoscope around his neck, Duo was ready to start the consults. He limped back into the hall and up to the reception to collect the file for the first patient.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Duo," Hilde said. "Make sure you get that looked at and if there's any problems, let me know. I can work your shifts as well, if need be."

"Thanks, Hilde, but I'll be fine. You've already done enough, now go home and relax," Duo replied with a small smile.

"I mean it, Duo. You really should be resting and taking it easy. I'm not happy about you working while injured and wish you'd let me take a look at it for you."

"We've already had this conversation, Hilde. There's no way you're getting into my pants and I'm quite okay to work," Duo growled. He really didn't need another mother hen fussing over him, Heero was bad enough.

"Don't worry, Hilde, I'll keep a close eye on him and make sure he doesn't do anything drastic."

Catherine gave the vet a sweet, innocent smile.

Somehow, Duo knew he was being conspired against. He shook his head. "I will be fine, the last thing I need is Mother Theresa and Florence Nightingale on my case. Now, if you will excuse me."

Duo grabbed the file and hobbled to the door that led to the waiting room, opening it he stuck his head inside. "Mrs. Beldon?"

A portly woman stood up and carried a cat travel cage through...

* * *

When Heero and Treize returned to the 'social room', Noin and Dermail were there, along with Dawn and had just finished informing the group of the doctor's findings regarding Sandra. Noin repeated the information to Heero and Treize. The woman was lucky, she'd received a mild concussion and bruising to her shoulders and lower back. Nothing was broken and there was no muscular damage either. The doctor had recommended bed rest for twenty-four hours and no riding for another two weeks. Sandra would be allowed up the following evening but was under strict instructions to take it easy for a few days.

Both Heero and Treize were relieved that Sandra was going to be okay. Heero told Noin and Dermail what Duo had done to treat Maestro, giving them a little more detail than what Dawn had supplied. "Doctor Maxwell said the horse will be out of action for at least two to three weeks and then when he does resume work, it will only be light to start with," Heero finished.

Noin thought for a moment and then replied. "We are very grateful to Doctor Maxwell for treating the horse, I'm sure Sandra will want to thank him herself once she is able to. Thank you too, Heero, for assisting him and for waiting around to let us know what happened." Noin paused for a moment and then continued in a much lower voice. "Dawn told me that Doctor Maxwell received a kick while treating Maestro, is he all right?"
"As far as we can tell it's only bruising. He was going back to the practice as he has evening consults, but he did say he would contact his own doctor and get the wound checked out. I'll know more once I get back," Heero replied.

"Please, give him our thanks for all he's done and let him know we are all hoping the kick is nothing serious. If there is anything we can do, let us know." Noin gave the young rider a warm smile. "I'd better let you go now, you must be anxious to get home and see how he is."

"Thanks." Heero gave a small smile in return. "I'll see you all tomorrow morning." Heero nodded to the rest of the group and left the manor, Treize and Joe following him out to give him a hand with his gear and Zero.

The rain was still falling, although it had slowed from the torrent of earlier. It didn't take long to get all of Heero's gear stowed in the trunk and Zero rugged and ready to travel. Joe dropped the tail gate of the float while Heero led the gray out and into the trailer, tying Zero up and then slipping back out to help Joe with the tail gate.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Heero," Joe said and then ducked back into the stables to check on his charges.

"Thanks, Joe."

"I'm going to be heading off shortly too," Treize said. "Just going to see that Goose and Duck are comfortable first. Please, tell Duo that if he needs a hand with the surgery or if there's anything I can do, to let me know."

"Thanks, Treize." Heero got into the driver's seat.

"I'll give you a call later to see what the doctor had to say. Drive safely." Treize stepped back.

Heero started the car and slowly eased out of the stable yard and along the driveway that would take him to the road and home. The driving conditions were appalling and Heero needed all his concentration on the road to ensure he got both himself and his beloved horse home safely. He didn't have time to think about Duo until he was pulling into the drive that would take him to the stables at the practice.

Bringing the float and car to a stop, Heero cut the engine and climbed out. He made a beeline for the stables, deciding to leave Zero in the float until he'd gotten the feeds in the stables and everything ready for the horses. Once all was done, Heero ran back out to the float, the rain coming down a little harder again. He quickly got Zero out and into the warm stable. The stallion immediately went to his feed bin and began to eat, the weather not bothering him much. Heero removed the floating boots and checked that Zero was warm and comfortable under his rug.

Satisfied that his horse was okay, Heero grabbed his stockman and prepared to brave the elements to bring Scythe and Shini in. He splashed his way through puddles and the rapidly fading light to the paddocks where two horses neighed forlornly at him. Cold fingers wrestled with the gate to Scythe's paddock and finally released the catch. The mare huddled close to Heero, turning her tail to the rain and wind that was beginning to pick up. She wasn't happy at all. She tugged at the lead rope as Heero tried to do up the gate.

"Wait, Scythe. Stand, girl!" Heero growled through chattering teeth.

The mare nudged him, impatient to get out of the weather. Shini neighed his annoyance from the next paddock. Finally Heero did the latch up and then headed for Shini's paddock. He was going to
lead the pair of them together; it was too cold, wet and windy to be out here for long. Heero
managed to get the lead rope on Shini and the gate open. Trying to hang onto two impatient horses
and do up the gate was proving to be a bit of a challenge though.

Scythe gave a snort and tossed her head, tugging at the lead rope again. Heero's cold fingers were
rapidly turning numb and the lead rope slipped through his hand. Scythe was immediately off, Shini
dancing and pulling to be free and join the mare.

"Ah fuck!" Heero cursed. "Shini! Stand still! Scythe, get back here," he called, but the mare didn't
stop. "Dammit!" he growled and gave Shini's lead rope a hard tug. "Wait, you impatient animal," he
snapped and finally got the gate to close properly. "Now we can go," Heero started to jog, Shinigami
trotting along beside him but doing his best to break free and get inside the warm stable. Heero didn't
know where Scythe had gone and was worried. He gave a loud sigh of relief though when he
entered the stables and found the mare standing with her head over her stable door eyeing the feed
bin and her dinner that was out of reach.

Scythe turned as she heard hooves and gave a soft whicker before pawing at her stable door.
Shinigami returned the whicker with a neigh of his own and almost dragged Heero across the stable
floor to get into his own, warm, dry box.

Having had enough of the weather, impatient animals and feeling chilled to the bone, Heero yanked
the door open and unclipped Shini's lead rope, the colt eagerly heading inside. Closing the door,
Heero went to let Scythe into her stable. With all the horses now happily eating their dinners, Heero
went to check on their physical state. Scythe's rug was soaked almost all the way through. Heero
undid the buckles and straps, removed the rug and dried the mare off before putting a dry rug on her.
After seeing to Scythe, Heero moved on to Shini. His rug was also saturated and it took Heero
another twenty minutes to dry the colt off and put another rug on him. The wet rugs were hung over
the empty stable doors to dry and Heero wandered wearily into the feed shed to make up the
morning feeds and replenish Zero's haynets for the 'morrow.

Once all the stable work was done and the car re-packed for the next day, Heero went into each
stable and hung up a haynet. He gave each horse a couple of carrots and friendly pat before checking
all doors were shut and bolted. Turning off the lights and locking the sliding door, Heero finally
made his way to the house. It was almost seven, Duo would be finished with consults very shortly.
Heero flipped on the lights, removed his boots and hung his stockman up in the laundry. He shivered
in the cold air and padded through to the lounge room in socked feet to turn the heater on. With the
warmth invading the room, Heero headed back to the kitchen to rummage around in the 'fridge and
see what they had to make dinner with.

Settling on eggs, bacon, mushrooms and toast, Heero set all the ingredients on the side and decided
to take a shower first. The dampness had penetrated through and there was a strong smell of horse
radiating off him. As much as he loved the scent of his equine friends, he didn't fancy having it in his
nostrils while trying to cook and eat dinner. Besides, he was feeling chilled and a shower would
thaw him out. Leaving the food items on the bench, Heero headed for the shower.

* * *

"If there's no improvement within the next three or four days, bring him back, Mr. Linton," Duo said
to the middle aged man as he opened the consulting room door for the client to leave.

"Thanks, Doc."

"My pleasure." Duo waited until the man had passed back into the waiting room before leaving the
consulting room and hobbling back to the reception area. Catherine was writing out a receipt for Mr.
Linton and Duo was pleased to note there weren't any more client files awaiting him. Looked like evening consults were finished. He was glad, his thigh was really painful now and he knew he needed to get his weight off it and get some rest; preferably with a large dose of morphine.

"Are you okay, Doctor Maxwell?" Catherine asked in concern as her boss slumped against the shelf between the hall and reception.

"Just sore. Is that it for tonight?"

"Yes. You don't look too good."

"I'll be okay," replied Duo. "I need to get off this leg for a bit though." He hated to admit to any weakness, but his thigh really was throbbing.

Immediately Catherine went into mother mode. "Right. You get yourself in here now and sit down," she said in a tone that clearly said he'd better do as she said.

"I can't, I have to clean the consulting room and sweep the waiting room."

"I said, sit down, Duo."

"But..."

"NOW."

Duo didn't know Catherine had such a loud voice or severe tone. She was usually a very gentle person. "Ah, okay." He shuffled into the reception area, doing his best not to wince as the woman forced him to sit. A cup of coffee was pressed into his hands.

"You stay right there and drink that. I'll go clean the consulting room, as well as the waiting room. It won't take me long and then I'll help you back to the house."

"You don't have to..." Duo was cut off by the look that was sent his way. "Ah, gotcha. I'll just sit here then."

"Good." Catherine disappeared with the broom, mop and bucket.

Duo sat in the chair and sipped on his coffee. He had to admit it felt better to have the weight off his leg. He listened to the soft humming coming from Catherine as she cleaned up the surgery and smiled to himself. Who would have guessed the soft spoken woman could be such a commanding person?

Catherine had finished in no time and put away the cleaning tools. Duo had managed to wrestle successfully with Nrobbuts and had all the day's work safely filed away. He was feeling a little smug at that. The smugness soon vanished though when he had to stand up and get himself back to the house. His thigh protested the movement. Catherine was beside him though and slung his arm over her shoulder to support him.

"Come on, I'll help you get back to the house. You really shouldn't be on that leg, Duo. I wish you'd let Hilde do the consults, she's going to be very annoyed with you when she finds out how sore you are."

Duo opted to stay quiet. He didn't need to add anything further to the woman's tirade. Besides, he was too busy trying to concentrate on walking and not falling flat on his face; his thigh really didn't want to work properly.
The kitchen light was on as they approached and Heero must have seen them coming down the path as he was suddenly beside them and next thing, had Duo scooped up in his arms and was carrying the vet into the house. Duo began to protest the action but was silenced by a look from his lover. Heero thanked Catherine and saw the woman out, promising to call her and let her know what the doctor said once she'd been to see Duo.

Duo knew better than to argue with Heero when he was in his 'protective' mode and suffered the fussing in silence. He allowed Heero to set him on the couch, tuck a blanket around him and leave him to watch television while he finished cooking their dinner. In one way it felt nice to be looked after and despite his independent streak, Duo felt warmed that his partner obviously cared so much for him.

Heero was just about to bring their dinner through to the lounge room to eat when there was a knock at the door. "I'll get it," Heero stated as he saw Duo about to get up off the couch.

"It's probably Doctor Po," Duo said.

"Good." Heero turned and went to let the doctor in.

"Ah, Duo. What have you been up to now?" Doctor Po asked as she came into the room.

"I had a little disagreement with a patient," Duo replied.

"More than a little one," Heero gruffed as he took the doctor's coat and hung it over the back of a chair. "How the heck you didn't break anything is beyond me."

Sally Po laughed and shook her head. "What happened?"

"I was attempting to inject a local anesthetic into an injured horse's cannon bone so I could stitch it up when he decided he didn't like what I was doing and kicked me," Duo replied.

"How long ago was this?"

Duo glanced at the clock on the wall. "About four hours ago."

"Where did he get you?"

"On the inside of my left thigh."

"Right. Let's take a look then." Doctor Po moved to the side so Duo could remove the blanket and his pants. She gave a low whistle when she saw the bruising.

Heero went a little green when he saw how much the thigh had begun to swell and the myriad of colors that adorned Duo's pale flesh. That had to hurt! No wonder Duo had been hardly able to walk.

As Sally Po began to gently prod and poke around, she continued her questions. "Is it painful when I do this?" Sally moved the thigh in one direction.

"No."

"How about this?"

"Shit!"

"I'll take that as a yes. What have you done to treat it?" Sally wasn't silly, even though Duo was a vet, she knew he was like all other doctors and would attempt to treat the injury themselves before
calling for assistance.

"I've put some Arnica tincture on it and taken painkillers, that's all," Duo replied.

"Well, that shouldn't do any harm, even if it doesn't do a lot of good."

"What's the verdict?" Heero asked from where he was sitting in the lounge chair opposite the couch.

"What it really needs is rest, but I know that's asking a lot," Sally began as she noted Duo's scowl when she mentioned 'rest'. "I'm going to prescribe some strong painkillers to start with. It will need an ice pack on it to bring the swelling down; ten minutes on and then thirty minutes off for a couple of hours. There's nothing broken, I don't need an x-ray to confirm that, if there was, you wouldn't be walking to start with." Sally smiled. "I'd like you to put a support bandage on it during the day, it will help with the swelling and also assist you when walking as I know you're not going to stay off it. I do expect you to sit and take the weight off it as much as possible though."

"Thanks, Sally." Duo shifted and made to reach for his pants.

"No, you don't. Ice pack, now," Sally said firmly.

Duo sighed. Heero smirked and fetched an ice pack from the freezer. He wrapped it in a tea towel to take the sharpness of the cold off it and handed it to Duo who put it on the bruising, wincing at the cold.

"Here's the 'script for the painkillers," Sally said as she passed a piece of paper over to Duo. "Get it filled as soon as you can, directions will be on the bottle. Call the surgery in a couple of days to make an appointment, I'd like to see you in at least 3 days time to see how it's healing. If you have any problems in the meantime, call me right away. Other than that, keep up with the ice pack, take the weight off it as much as possible and you should be fine. Here's a bandage to use for support."

Heero took the bandage and set it to the side. "I'll make sure he wears it and rests that leg as much as possible."

"Thank you, Heero. I'd better be going now, one more call to make and then it's home for a hot bath for me." Sally stood up. "I'll see you in three days, Doctor Maxwell."

"I'll make the appointment, Doctor Po," Duo returned.

"Good." Sally took her coat from Heero and allowed him to escort her back out the house.

Duo shifted the ice pack. Despite the cold of it, it felt good against the throbbing thigh. He looked up as Heero returned.

"I'll get our dinner now," Heero said and went through to the kitchen to fetch the meal he'd prepared. Handing Duo his, Heero sat on the floor next to his lover and began to eat. The television droned in the background, offering a little in the way of distraction. Then Heero spoke.

"I'll still kiss it better for you."

~ * ~

tbc....
Chapter 48

After finishing dinner, Heero went and filled Duo's script at the late night chemist in the town, he didn't want Duo to be in any unnecessary pain and despite Duo's protests about the state of the weather outside, Heero was adamant and left to get the pills. It didn't take him long and when he got back, Duo was still on the couch, ice pack almost melted. Heero removed the ice pack and replaced it in the freezer for later use. Passing Duo two of the pills, Heero then proceeded to kiss the bruising better as he'd promised.

"You were very lucky," Heero commented as he pressed feather kisses to Duo's thigh.

Duo panted softly by way of reply.

"Any higher and your chances of becoming a father would have been in serious doubt."

Violet eyes widened at that comment. "Heero? In case you had forgotten, I'm gay. The only chance I'll ever have of becoming a father is if I give up veterinary science and join the priesthood."

Heero snickered and then blew warm air up the leg of Duo's boxers. Duo moaned as the warmth whispered over his balls.

"Tease," Duo gasped as another breath of air puffed up his boxers and across his hardening shaft.

"What happened to your declaration of no sex until after the training camp and selections?" Heero questioned, his voice husky as he mouthed Duo's erection through the silk of the boxers.

"Let me make a slight amendment to that statement," Duo groaned. "No sexual penetration until after the selections; anything else, well, that's negotiable."

"Then oral sex is a possibility?" Heero's fingers wormed their way under the elastic of Duo's boxers and began to ease them from his lover's hips.

"I'd say a very definite possibility," panted Duo as he raised his hips a little.

"Good, because I'm hungry." Heero tossed Duo's boxers to the side and proceeded to swallow his lover's shaft from tip to root.

All Duo could manage was a few incoherent moans as his eyes rolled back and he let the pleasure overwhelm him.

* * *

The storm had blown itself out by the following morning. Heero stood at the kitchen window sipping on his coffee and gazing out at the landscape. The sky was still overcast but the wind had died down. Puddles were scattered around the yard and Heero could see a couple of branches lying in the paddocks, severed from the trunks of majestic trees, a reminder of how strong Mother Nature could be. He made a mental note not to put Scythe or Shini in those paddocks until he'd had a chance to remove the limbs and check the fences were okay. A soft sound behind him had Heero turning around and he gave a concerned look as his lover hobbled into the kitchen.

Overnight Duo's thigh had stiffened considerably and it was protesting any movement. Duo winced.
as he took his weight on it, moving slowly and trying not to jar the bruised muscles. Sitting down at the kitchen table he gave his partner a smile of thanks as Heero placed a glass of water and two pain pills in front of him. He took them, swallowing and hoping it wouldn't take long for the pills to kick in.

"I think you should stay here today," Heero said as he started to gather together the ingredients for their breakfast and set them on the table.

Duo peered over the box of cereal. "As much as I'm loathe to admit it, I don't think I'd be of much use to you today anyway."

"You need to rest that leg, give it a chance to heal. Better to be taking a couple of days now to get it right than keep on it and have it give out when you really need it," Heero said softly as he poured a generous amount of milk over his cereal.

"When will they be making the final selection and announcing the team?"

"In two days."

"Right. I'll play the part of recovering invalid for today and tomorrow, but I'm coming with you for the announcement," Duo stated and then began to eat his breakfast.

With breakfast finished, Heero insisted on bandaging Duo's thigh with the support bandage that Sally had left. He knew Duo was quite capable of putting the bandage on himself, but Heero wanted to get a closer look at the bruising. He was pleased to note that the swelling had gone down a little, even if the kaleidoscope of colors was impressive. With Duo taken care of, Heero went to put the horses out and finish off the stable work before heading off to the manor and another day's training.

* * *

The next two days passed with Duo taking it easy as requested and his injury improving for it. He really didn't have much choice with Mother Theresa and Florence Nightingale, as he'd dubbed Hilde and Catherine, on his case. Treize had called and been reassured that Duo was okay and recovering nicely, Sandra had also called and expressed her concern for Duo's injury and also to thank him for taking care of Maestro. Zechs dropped in whilst passing through to a case to see if Duo was really okay and if he needed any help. Trowa and Quatre sent their regards and offers of help. Duo was touched that he had so many friends, all of them concerned for his welfare.

Hilde had insisted on doing all the surgery that was booked in, Duo found himself relegated to playing the part of anesthetist while Hilde wielded the scalpel. Catherine had placed a stool inside the consulting room and told Duo he was to use it. He felt a little uncomfortable at first, sitting on the stool to examine his patients when he should be standing, but word of his 'accident' had gotten around and his clients were more than sympathetic to his cause and insisted he remain off his feet.

By the time the eve of the selection rolled around, Duo was ready to tear his hair out with frustration at being kept immobile for so long. He had to admit though that he could walk a lot easier now. He'd made his appointment with Sally and the doctor had gone over the bruising again, pleased with how it was responding to the treatment. Sally suggested keeping the support bandage on for a few more days as a precaution, but otherwise gave Duo the all clear to resume his 'normal' life.

The morning of the final day of the camp dawned and Duo was eager to be heading off. The air was crisp and cool, and while still overcast, it didn't look likely they would get much in the way of rain. Heero had been up early and done the horses while Duo had made pancakes for breakfast. Once Zero was loaded up, they were off, Duo smiling broadly at being able to accompany Heero while
Heero was trying to get rid of the butterflies in his stomach.

Arriving at the manor, Zero was unloaded and placed in his stable, Duo carrying some of the gear from the car while Joe came over to assist once he'd spotted them. Heero set about settling Zero, Duo being bombarded by questions from Joe and some of the other grooms as to his recovery. Once everyone was on the grounds they were summoned to the manor to discuss the day's format.

Once they were all seated in the 'conference' room, Noin began her address. "As you are all aware, today is the final day of this camp and also when we will announce the team for the Nations cup. During this past week we have had the chance to work closely with you all, find your weaknesses and hopefully have given you all something to work on. Captain Dermail and I have our selection for the team in mind, however the rest of the selectors will also be present today and we will make the final selection this afternoon. The format for today will consist of jumping several different courses; while not long courses, each is designed to test your capabilities and your horse's capabilities. Based on your performances during the show season and how you perform today the team will be finalized. Does anyone have any questions?" Noin finished her announcement and eyed the group. "No? Right. You may go saddle up and warm your horses up. We will begin in an hour. Thank you."

Riders and grooms all began to exit and head for the stables and their respective mounts. Treize walked with Heero and Duo. "This is it then, all the blood, sweat and tears comes down to today," Treize said with a smile.

"Even if I don't make it into the team, I've learnt a lot this week," Heero replied.

"You can never stop learning, Heero," Treize said.

"Very true," Duo stated. "What do you think about everyone's chances, Treize?"

Treize thought for a moment. "Everyone here has just as much chance of making the team as the next person. All are good riders with talented horses. Each of us has our weakness as well as our strengths and it will be a case of matching up the best four so that the strengths of each one counteract the weaknesses of the others."

"I'm glad I'm not one of the selectors," Heero muttered. "I don't fancy them the job at all."

"Me either," Duo sighed.

"Come on, cheer up," Treize laughed. "It's not as if you're going to your execution."

"Yeah, you're right," Heero snickered. "If we don't make it this time, there's always next time."

Duo opted to stay quiet. While Heero's words were true, if he didn't make the team this time there would always be the next one, Duo could feel the uncertainty rolling off Heero. This selection meant a lot to Heero, it was something he'd been striving for all his life and to come so close to reaching his goal... Duo knew that if Heero didn't make the team he would be very upset despite the mask he would put on to hide his disappointment. Duo could only hope and pray that all Heero's dedication and hard work would pay off.

* * *

The sky remained overcast and a light breeze blew, but the rain stayed away. Duo was grateful for that. Standing under a tree soaking wet wasn't his idea of a good time. With the amount of rain they'd had over the past three days, the ground was rather soggy and hard going for the horses. Duo could see how the grass was turning to mud and sucking at the horses hooves as they warmed up.
Heero wasn't too happy with the ground conditions either. Zero was sure on his feet and while slipping was always a possibility, it was unlikely for Zero to do so, unless Heero was asking for very sharp turns.

"You need to adapt your riding to the conditions," Treize said as he brought Goose to a trot beside Heero.

"I was just thinking the same thing," Heero returned.

"The selectors know that the ground conditions are shocking and they will be looking to see how you cope, if you think about that and ride accordingly."

"It would be stupid to try and take sharp corners," Heero said.

"I agree. Strategy is what's needed here and that's what they will be looking for: a rider that can think and apply other methods to gain a clear round in good time without putting himself or the horse at risk."

Heero gave a small smile. "It will be a true test then to see if we've all been paying attention to the lessons and coaching this past week."

"Exactly. No need for heroics today. Just go out and jump the best you can, keeping yours and your horse's safety the priority. Good luck, Heero."

"Thanks, Treize. Good luck to you too."

"I think we are wanted." Treize drew rein, bringing Goose back to a walk and turned towards where Noin and Dermail were calling them over. Once everyone was present, Noin addressed the group.

"The first course we want you to try is a simple course of eight fences set between three feet six and four foot. What we will be looking for is how you tackle each fence, your line, track, approach and getaway. You have ten minutes to familiarize yourselves with the course, all jumps are numbered and you will jump in the following order: Treize, Alex, Zoe, Heero and Alan." Noin turned to Dermail and the pair walked over to where David Prescott, the head selector, was standing along with four other people.

Heero handed his reins to Duo, Treize handing Goose's to Joe and the pair went to walk the course. Duo took the opportunity to have a little 'talk' with Zero.

"You be careful out there, Zero. That ground isn't good and I don't want you slipping or hurting yourself, Heero either for that matter. I think we've all had enough injuries to last us a lifetime."

Zero nuzzled the nice human's chest, begging for a carrot.

Duo chuckled. "Yes, I have your reward, boy, but you'll have to wait until you've jumped clear and brought yourself and your master back safely."

Zero didn't understand what was being said, but he knew by the tone of the nice human's voice that this was important. He blew softly through his nostrils.

Heero and Treize returned from walking the course, faces unreadable.

"What's it like, boss?" Joe asked as he handed Goose's reins back to Treize.

"Not to bad. As Noin said, it's designed to test our skills at negotiating a course. No sharp twists or
turns, however, you will need to have your horse responsive to your lightest aid if you want to get around clear," Treize replied as he mounted the big bay.

Heero prepared to mount and was stopped by a hand on his arm. He turned to look into Duo's concerned violet eyes.

"Be careful, Heero," Duo whispered.

"I don't plan on taking unnecessary risks, Duo. The conditions are too slippery out there, it's going to be like riding on a skating rink," Heero replied with a reassuring smile. "I want both Zero and myself to be in one piece at the end of the day."

Duo lowered his eyes. "I don't mean to sound like I'm nagging..."

"You're not," Heero interrupted. "You never nag. You're concerned, Duo, and that tells me just how much you love me. I love you too and there's no way I plan on getting hurt or having Zero hurt." Heero's words were soft, his eyes warm with love for his partner and he gave the vet a gentle smile. "We'll be fine."

Duo nodded and gave a smile in return.

Heero mounted and slipped his right foot into the stirrup, settling himself in the saddle and collecting up his reins. Zero felt fresh and confident beneath him, Heero knew the gray would look after him.

"Good luck," Duo said as Heero prepared to walk Zero over to where the rest of the group were gathering.

"Thanks."

* * *

Treize and Goose sailed around the course, clearing every jump and making it look easy. Heero and the remaining riders though knew it was harder than it looked and it was Treize's skill combined with Goose's training that got them around in such a seemingly effortless manner.

Alex and Firefox also went clear, the little chestnut keeping his feet well and showing he could rise to the challenge. Zoe was unlucky to have one fence down, Periwinkle didn't like the heavy going but gamely approached each fence. After landing a little awkwardly over the fourth and slipping slightly, the mare came in wrong for the fifth jump and while she did her best to clear it, her hind legs touched to rail and knocked it from the support cups. It was simply bad luck.

Heero ran his hand down Zero's neck as the gray snatched at his bit, eager to be off. Remembering all he'd been taught that week, Heero gathered his horse together and rode with skill and precision. He took a slightly longer track than normal given the ground conditions, allowing Zero every possible chance of coming into his fences squarely and therefore clearing them. It was a neat and precise round, even Duo could see a marked improvement in his lover's riding.

Alan was the last to go and it appeared that Phantom was another horse that didn't like the heavy going. The chestnut stallion's ears were back and his tail swishing as Alan rode him around.

"I'd say Alan's got his work cut out for him," remarked Treize as he watched the battle of wills between horse and rider.

Alan turned the stallion towards the first jump and reluctantly, the horse jumped it. Even with Duo's limited experience in the field of equine competition, he could see that Phantom wasn't happy and
Alan was having to work hard to keep the horse going.

The second, third and fourth fences were cleared, due more to Alan’s determined riding than anything else. When they reached the fifth fence it was clear that the stallion didn't want to jump any more and dug his heels in.

"I'd be giving him a good whack with the whip," muttered Treize.

"There might be an underlying problem," mused Heero as he studied the chestnut.

"Stubbornness," replied Treize.

"I don't know," Heero pondered.

"Trust me, Heero. That animal is just plain stubborn. It gets a bee in its bonnet every now and then and refuses to jump."

"So does Goose at times."

"Only if Duck isn't around."

"Maybe it's something like that with Phantom?"

"No. Alan's had him checked out by vets, chiropractors, equine herbal experts and a load of other so called professionals. None of them can find a reason for this to happen. They've tried many different things, some seem to be working and then, bam, he's refusing to jump again. Usually it only happens rarely, but there's always the chance it will happen when you least want or need it to."

"Ah."

"Have they had him checked by an animal or equine psychologist?" Duo asked as he watched Phantom reluctantly jump fence five when Alan re-presented him. Animal psychologists were starting to pop up here and there. Some were simply 'quacks' while others were genuine in their vocation. The 'true' animal psychologist studied the behavioral traits of their respective field of study and were slowly being recognized as a valuable asset when determining a problem. While Duo had never dealt with it himself as such, he'd read reports through the veterinary journals about the success a lot of these psychologists were having treating various problems.

"Yes, Alan said they had and the psychologist couldn't find anything to warrant this behavior. The psychologist was of the opinion it's just the horse himself. There are days when he simply doesn't want to jump, I guess like we have off days, days when we don't want to go to work." Treize turned his gaze back to Alan who was using his seat, legs and whip to ride Phantom at the last fence.

"Unfortunately you can't explain logic to a horse," Heero chuckled.

"No, you can't," Treize smiled.

"Then I guess there's not a whole lot Alan can do about it," Duo said.

"Other than use everything at his disposal to convince the horse it's better to jump, no, there isn't a great deal he can do. Don't get me wrong, Alan's not the sort to use excessive force or be cruel to Phantom, he wouldn't lay into him with the whip and beat the crap out of him. No, he uses the whip to re-enforce his leg aid and add a touch more strength to his riding."

Phantom did clear the last fence and despite the pats and praise Alan was lavishing on him, the
stallion continued to keep his ears flat and swish his tail in annoyance.

With the course completed, it was time to move onto the next part.

* * *

The day wore on, riders and horses becoming tired as they finished each 'competition'. They jumped grids, off set fences, courses that were deliberately set with the wrong striding; low fences, high fences and finally a speed and skills course.

Heero had used all his concentration, everything he'd been taught and learnt over the years to have Zero traveling well and responsive to his slightest touch. Treize had gone clear over the speed and skills course, Zoe also went clear, Alan managed to convince Phantom to jump and the chestnut only had one refusal; and that had been Alan's fault. Alex, on the ever nimble Firefox, had ended up with a rail down and four faults. Zero was getting tired, he'd been jumping for quite some time. He tossed in a small buck as his master asked him to canter, Zero's way of letting his master know he really would rather be inside his warm stable eating dinner.

"I know, boy," Heero soothed. "This is the last one, just give it your best shot for me, Zero, then you can have all the carrots you want and a big feed for being such a good boy."

Zero snorted.

Duo watched with his heart in his mouth. He could tell Zero was tired, the bounce was gone from the long stride, Zero's tail carriage not as gay as usual. "Just one more round, Zero, one more to go, that's all. Look after Heero for me, please," Duo whispered under his breath.

The first three fences were cleared easily, four strides and they were approaching the rails. Zero launched into the air, landed and responded to his master's aids to turn. Two strides and Zero was straightening up, four strides and he was leaping into the air again over the brush fence. Heero planned ahead, knowing he would need to meet the wall dead on and have Zero turning within two strides to angle the oxer and meet the gate on the right stride.

The wall flew underneath them, Heero sitting hard into his saddle and using his seat and legs to bring Zero almost to a halt to turn. Two strides and they were approaching the oxer on the angle Heero wanted. Zero gathered himself together, brought his hind legs underneath his body and went to push into the air. As his forelegs left the ground a hind leg slipped. It threw Zero slightly off balance and the gray made a desperate lunge forward, twisting his hind end to clear the fence. Landing on the other side, Zero pecked and then regained his balance.

Heero felt the slip and desperately pushed himself forward in an attempt to stay with Zero. He let the reins slip through his fingers so as not to jab Zero in the mouth and give the horse as much help as he could. As the gray landed and pecked, Heero jolted in the saddle, his right arm bracing against Zero's neck and sending sharp pains through the upper arm. Heero bit his lip and tasted blood as he fought the wave of pain and did his best to collect his reins and his horse.

Zero sensed there was something amiss with his master and his stride began to slow. Strong legs were suddenly on his sides and the familiar touch back on the reins.

"It's okay, Zero. One fence to go."

The words reassured the stallion and Zero found himself facing the gate. Three strides and he was over it, the contact on the bit slowing his pace and Zero was more than happy to walk.

Watching the small slip and landing peck had Duo twisting his braid in his hands. He didn't see the
grimace of pain pass over Heero's face. As soon as Heero and his horse returned to where he was waiting, Duo was instantly running an eye over the animal, making sure his 'charge' was all right. Patting the gray, Duo fed the horse his much loved carrots before turning to Heero who was dismounting. "You scared me there for a moment, Heero. What happened?"

"He slipped," came the quiet reply.

Duo was instantly on alert, Heero's voice held a touch of pain to it. "Are you okay?" Duo moved closer to Heero and now that he could see his lover properly, he noticed Heero favoring his right arm as he wrestled to loosen Zero's girth. Duo immediately placed his hand on Heero's arm, stilling the rider. "You hurt yourself, didn't you?"

Heero lowered his head and gave a soft sigh. "I jarred my arm when he landed."

"Bad?"

"No. Just very sore."

"Right. You hold the reins and let me take care of the rest." Duo quickly loosened Zero's girth and ran the stirrups up. "Come on, let's get him back to the stables and rugged up. You lot are going to be needed in the conference room for the announcement of the team in half an hour." Duo could sense that Heero needed a few minutes away from all the others to sort himself out and with Treize approaching, Duo was determined to get Heero that bit of privacy; he also wanted to have a look at Heero's arm and make sure all was okay and that Heero hadn't done any damage.

Treize was leading Tall Geese, Joe beside him with Short Duck. "I thought you were going to hit that one for a moment, Heero," Treize said, unaware that Heero had hurt himself.

Heero put on a mask and faced the other man. "Yeah, so did I, but Zero made a good recovery."

"That he did."

"Look, I don't mean to be rude or anything, Treize, but Zero is tired and I want to get him settled properly before the announcement. I think Heero could do with a bit of a rest too," Duo said with a smile to take any sting out of his words.

"No problem, Duo. I need to take care of Goose too. I'll meet you both in the stable courtyard after the horses are settled," Treize replied and began to walk off.

"Thanks, Duo," Heero whispered.

"My pleasure, Heero. Now, let's get going, this horse needs to be taken care of and so do you."

* * *

Once Zero had been unsaddled, brushed down and rugged up, Duo turned his attention to Heero. "Let me take a look at that arm, Heero."

"It's fine, Duo. It's settled down and doesn't hurt as much now."

"I don't care. Off with the shirt, now."

Heero knew there was no point in arguing, Duo's tone of voice told him it would be useless. He stood up and began to remove his jacket and shirt. Duo let his fingers wander over Heero's biceps, carefully manipulating the area and noting any winces or tenderness. While he may be a vet, the
basic physiology was similar in animals and humans and Duo's skilled fingers could detect a broken bone or muscular damage. Having poked and prodded long enough, Duo was satisfied that Heero hadn't done any further damage and it was a simple case of jarring as Heero had thought.

"I'd recommend putting some anti-inflammatory gel on that when we get home, it will take a lot of the soreness out."

"Thanks, Duo," Heero replied as he re-buttoned his shirt and pulled his jacket back on. "I think I could do with a long soak in the tub with some mineral salts to ease all the aches from my muscles," he added. It had been a long and tiring week and all the riders, not to mention the horses, were feeling tired and worn out.

"I think Zero could do with a couple of days off as well," chuckled Duo as he collected the last of the grooming tools and placed them into the carry bag.

"I think he's earned it. If he does make the team I'll give him a couple of days to rest; if he hasn't, well, I think I'll give him a couple of months spell in the paddock."

"Good idea. You ready?"

"Hai."

"Come on then, I can see Treize waiting in the courtyard."

The pair left the stables and met up with Treize. They walked in silence to the manor and conference room where they would soon find out if they would be packing to go to Sydney for the cup or turning their horses out for a much deserved break.

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There was a low hum of conversation when the four of them arrived at the conference room, Zoe and her groom Carol were the last of the team hopefuls to arrive. Everyone was asking everyone else what they thought, how their horse had gone and comparing notes on the various courses they had jumped that day.

The conversation soon stopped though as Noin, Dermail and Mr Prescott entered the room. Everyone took a seat and stared at the three with anticipation. Dermail and Prescott took a seat leaving Noin standing to address the group.

"First of all I'd like to thank you all for coming to this training camp and giving up your time. Captain Dermail and myself have enjoyed working with you all and hope you will all take something away from this camp with you. Each and every one of you has talent, good horses and should be proud of your achievements."

A smattering of applause broke Noin's speech for a moment and she smiled at the group.

"After working with you all this week, discovering your strengths and weaknesses, Dermail and I have passed on our recommendations for the final team to the board of selectors. The board has taken those recommendations into consideration and combined with your past performance records along with what the selectors have witnessed today, the final team for Sydney has been selected. I'll hand the floor over to David Prescott for the team announcement." Noin smiled at the group and sat down.

David Prescott stood up and cast his eyes over the group. He cleared his throat and began to speak.

"On behalf of the selection committee I'd like to thank Miss Noin and Captain Dermail for their
efforts this week in training and assessing you all. It's never easy to select an International team and even harder when you have to choose from such talented people. Each one of you would do your country proud and are to be congratulated on your efforts. Unfortunately there can only be four in the team and after much consultation, the board has made its decision.” Prescott paused for a moment and glanced at the expectant faces.

Heero was feeling sick, the anticipation tearing at his insides. Duo wasn't much better, his nerves were fraying with the wait. Treize appeared calm but inside he was a mass of butterflies. The rest of the group wore similar expressions.

"The team to represent Australia in the Nations cup will be as follows; Alex and Firefox, Treize and Tall Geese, Zoe and Periwinkle..."

Heero and Alan held their collective breath.

"Heero and Zero."

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tbc...
"The team to represent Australia in the Nations cup will be as follows; Alex and Firefox, Treize and Tall Geese, Zoe and Periwinkle..."

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"Heero and Zero."

With Prescott's words, Heero let go a breath he hadn't been aware of holding, his heart hammered in his chest and a trickle of sweat ran down his spine. For a moment there he thought he would faint. The words began to sink home. *He'd been selected, Zero had made the team; they were going to Sydney to represent their country.* A grin began to form on his face as he turned to Duo.

Duo had also been holding his breath and almost pulled his braid to shreds while waiting for the announcement. When Heero's name was read out it was all he could do not to yell his excitement and grab his partner in a bear hug. Instead he turned to meet Heero's gaze, his eyes alive with joy.

"I made it," Heero said in a whisper, the reality still sinking in.

Duo grinned from ear to ear. "Yes, you did, Heero. You deserved it too, Zero has been such a good boy and you've worked damn hard for this. God, I'm so proud of you!" Duo wanted to kiss his lover to show him just how proud he was, but it would have to wait.

"Congratulations, Heero." Treize watched the various emotions play over Heero's face when the announcement was made with mild amusement. He'd never doubted for a minute that Heero wouldn't make the team.

"Thanks, Treize. Congratulations to you too." Heero offered his hand and the pair shook.

"Yes, congratulations, Treize," Duo said, the grin on his face almost stretching from ear to ear as he shook the other man's hand.

Around the room similar congratulations, along with commiserations to Alan, were taking place. Heero and Treize were quick to join in. Once the reality had begun to set in a bit and the noise slowing to a low roar, Noin clapped her hands and called for silence. Immediately everyone shut up and faced the team coach.

"Firstly let me congratulate you four on being selected. Alan, believe me when I say, this hasn't been an easy selection and the board would like you to be available as a reserve rider should one of the four representatives fall ill or for whatever reason be unable to compete."

"Thank you," Alan replied. Although he was disappointed at not having made the final team, there was always next time and being considered as the reserve rider should the need arise was still an honor.

"For the rest of you, the cup is in four weeks at the State Equestrian Center, Sydney. As you may or may not know, it is being held in conjunction with the Equestrian games this year and therefore there will be an extensive week of equestrian activities and competitions going on. Right now though, you've all had an exhausting week and I'm sure you're all looking forward to going home and relaxing for a couple of days. I will be in touch with all of you in about a week’s time to advise you
of the details and all the information you will need for the cup competition. Again, thank you all for attending this camp and congratulations." Noin stepped to the side amid applause from the riders and grooms alike before leaving the room with Dermail and Prescott.

"That's it for now then?" Duo asked, his grin still firmly in place.

"That's it," Treize replied.

"What now?" Heero said, the smile on his face still present, as was the feeling of euphoria.

"Now we go home, take a couple of days off and then get stuck back into the routine of keeping our horses and ourselves fit for the cup." Treize gave a soft laugh at the bewildered looks on both mens' faces. "Noin will be in touch over the next few days. You can expect to get a letter in the mail, along with a thick stack of papers. That will explain to you where in Sydney we are to be, what day, what stables and accommodation has been organized as well as a list of the events being held during the course of the week."

"Does that mean we will be there for the entire week then?" Heero asked.

"Not really. The games actually only run for four days. The first day is a sort of unofficial welcome, and opening. The following day signals the start of competition and activities; the Nations cup is held over the last two days."

"Aa."

Duo was doing mental calculations in his head. "I guess that means we will be away from home for about eight days."

Heero quirked an eyebrow.

"Two days traveling there, four days at the show and then two days traveling back home."

"I'd say that's pretty close, Duo," Treize said. "You know you're more than welcome to float Zero down with Goose and Duck in my trailer if you like."

"Thanks, Treize. I'll think about it." While Heero appreciated the offer from Treize, he felt safer if he towed his own horse and float.

"Offer's there," Treize said again as he stood up. "I'd better get going and get Goose and Duck sorted out. There's a lot of stuff to pack and Joe's still got to get his gear packed up from staying this week. I'll call you in a couple of days, Heero."

"Thanks. Treize?"

Treize paused. "Yes?"

"When do you want me back at work?"

Treize smiled. "After the Nations cup, Heero. Concentrate on that first and then once it's over you can return to work."

The rest of the riders and grooms had begun to leave, Heero and Duo filed out and headed for the stables. Heero was tired, all the stress of the past week catching up with him and he was looking forward to getting home and having that long, hot bath. Between the two of them they managed to get all the gear to fit inside Henrietta; no mean feat in Duo's opinion.
With the gear all stowed, Heero led Zero out and into the waiting horse float, Duo throwing up the tail gate behind them and securing it. Heero stepped out through the small door in the front and slid the small bolt home. Climbing into the driver's seat, Heero did up his seat belt, Duo mimicking his actions on the passenger side and they were off.

Neither man spoke much on the drive back to the practice, Hero was concentrating on driving while Duo gazed out the window figuring out in his mind how to organize his practice to survive for eight days without him, not to mention getting someone to take care of Shini and Scythe while they were gone.

* * *

Pulling into the stable yard, Heero had barely had chance to turn off the engine when Hilde, Catherine, Trowa and Quatre appeared out of the stable block and swooped on them.

"Did you make it?"
"Were you selected?"
"Who's in the team?"
"Did Treize get in?"

All four questions were fired off simultaneously by four different mouths. Duo laughed and Heero chuckled at the obvious excitement and anticipation of the four. Getting out of the car, Heero waited for Duo to step around Henrietta and join him, his arm automatically winding around Duo's waist. He looked at the four eager faces before him and cleared his throat.

"Treize made the team." He paused. "So did I."
"Yes!"
"I knew you would."
"Congratulations!"
"Heero, that's wonderful!"

Heero found himself being slapped on the back, hugged and kissed all at the same time by his overjoyed friends. Zero broke the moment by giving an indignant whinny from inside the float.

"I think someone's jealous," chuckled Duo as he slipped out of their group of happy friends and went to the horse float to unload Zero.

Everyone pitched in to help unpack the car, put the gear away and settle Zero for the night. Heero was touched to see that Trowa and Quatre had already brought Scythe and Shini in, Zero basked in all the attention he was getting, carrots appearing from all directions and the stallion happily scoffed them down, submitting to the pats for as long as the carrots kept coming.

Eventually Duo managed to drag his lover away from the stables, the other four following them to the house. Hilde and Catherine had closed the practice early so they could be there to congratulate, or commiserate as the case may be, with Heero when he got back. There hadn't been much booked in and Hilde had gotten through the consults in record time.

Sitting around the kitchen table, Quatre produced a bottle of champagne and opened it, pouring the
bubbly liquid into six glasses and handing one to every person. He raised his glass and called for silence.

"Here's to Heero and Zero. Congratulations on making it into the team. May you have the best of luck and bring home the cup for Australia." Quatre tipped his glass and took a sip.

"Hear, hear," the rest of the group murmured and raised their glasses, taking a drink.

Heero looked around at his friends and stood up. Five faces turned to him in expectation. "Firstly, I'd like to thank you all for being my friends, for supporting Zero and myself in our endeavor to represent our country. Secondly, I'd like to thank Zero. He's one heck of a horse and he gave me all he had today. Lastly," Heero swallowed and his eyes sought out Duo's, softening with love as they found violet. "Lastly, I'd like to thank Duo. Without his love and support I don't think I would have been as successful as I have been. His constant presence, encouraging me, helping me, both physically and emotionally is what's enabled me to succeed. This achievement is as much his as mine. I love you, Duo." Heero raised his glass and took a drink.

Duo felt the lump wedge in his throat, his heart hammering in his chest as he listened to Heero's words. Tears pricked at the back of his eyes and he blinked them away. He returned the loving gaze with a gentle smile, stood up and removed the glass from Heero's hand, setting it on the table with his own. Then he took Heero's cheeks softly in his hands. "I love you too, Heero," he whispered and then kissed Heero as deeply as he could.

"Awww, that's so sweet," murmured Hilde and rested her head on Catherine's shoulder as she smiled at the pair still locked at the lip.

Quatre also smiled at the couple, his eyes misting slightly and his hand sought out Trowa's. Fingers entwined and Trowa gave his partner's hand a loving squeeze.

Breaking for air and realizing the sudden silence that surrounded them, Duo blushed and sat down again, embarrassment in his eyes. Heero also flushed red, a dazed look in his eyes with the intensity of the kiss he'd just been bestowed. He swallowed and tried to think of something to say to break the silence that had descended on the group. He was saved from his dilemma though by Trowa.

"Now that's what I call a proper congratulation."

* * *

The four friends left after another hour and the bottle of champagne had been consumed. Heero had been touched by the love and support shown to him by their friends, he'd never dreamt he would have such wonderful people in his life. He was brought back from his musings by a gentle touch to his arm and he looked around to find Duo smiling at him.

"Happy thoughts?" Duo questioned.

"Of course," Heero replied as he pulled his partner into his lap and wound his arms around the vet. "I still can't believe that after all these years of trying, I've finally made the grade, been selected to ride with the Australian flag on my saddle blanket. It's a dream come true."

"And a dream that you really deserve, Heero. You've worked really hard for this and I'm so happy for you." Duo tucked his head under Heero's chin and savored the warmth of his lover's embrace.

"I couldn't have done it without you, Duo." Heero placed a kiss to the top of Duo's head.

"Aww, stop with the mushy stuff, you'll have me sniffling like a girl in a minute."
"Heero laughed.

"How about that long soak in the tub you were muttering about earlier?"

Heero sighed. "That would be heaven."

"Come on then, I'll wash your back if you wash mine," Duo said with a wicked grin as he stood up.

"You sure there's room in the tub for both of us?" Heero queried with a raised eyebrow.

"There will be if you sit on my lap."

"Ohh, camp's over now..."

"Exactly," Duo said with a lustful smirk. "You've been riding Zero all week, I think it's time you rode me now."

Heero shivered.

* * *

Treize placed the glass of red wine down on the table and went to answer the summons of the doorbell. His face lit up as he spied the person standing on the other side. "Zechs!"

"Good to see you, Treize," the blonde vet replied with a smile.

"Come in, come in," Treize said as he opened the door wider to admit the other man, then closed it behind him.

"I hope I'm not intruding."

"Never." Treize took the vet's coat and hung it up. Turning back around he stepped forward and enveloped the tall blonde in his arms, searching for and finding ruby lips which he proceeded to thoroughly kiss. Breaking the kiss he stepped back and held the vet at arms length. "Let me look at you for a moment," Treize said softly.

Zechs blushed, but allowed his lover the small request.

You're just as gorgeous as I remember."

"Treize! You only saw me a couple of days ago!"

"I know, but it feels like a lifetime. I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," Zechs replied softly and then asked the question that had been on the tip of his tongue ever since he'd arrived. "Did you make the team?"

Treize smiled. "Yes."

"Great! Congratulations!" Zechs leaned close and kissed his lover deeply. "What about Heero?" he asked when they broke apart.

"Heero also made the team."

"That's wonderful news." Zechs' eyes were shining as he spoke.

"Come through to the lounge and share a drink with me and I'll tell you all about it," said Treize and
turned to lead the way, holding onto Zechs' hand.

Sitting next to his lover on the couch, Zechs sipped at the red wine, the alcohol slipping down his throat easily and setting a warmth spreading through his system. Treize told him all about the day’s activities, the courses they'd had to jump and then the final selection.

"When is the cup being held again?" Zechs asked as he set his glass down and snuggled deeper into the other man's arms, his hand dropping to caress Treize's thigh.

"Four weeks time, in Sydney," replied Treize, his voice a little husky.

"Hmmm."

"You think you might be able to make it for the cup competition? It's held on the last two days." Treize let his own fingers wander over the muscled back of the vet, the soft cotton of the shirt adding a slight fiction to the touch.

"I sure hope to. I've got a few days holiday owing to me so if you can give me specific dates, I'll put in my application at work to take my holidays then."

"That would be wonderful," Treize said and then moaned softly as Zechs' fingers found the hardening bulge of his groin.

"Take me to bed and show me just how wonderful," Zechs murmured in a low purr.

"It would be my pleasure."

* * *

"Oh, Heero," Duo groaned as Heero ran his teasing fingers over Duo's stiff length. The water around them sloshed as Duo removed his fingers from Heero's backside to grasp the rider's hips, steadying his lover as Heero released Duo's cock and positioned himself over his lover's tip.

"Love you," Heero said and sealed their mouths as he began to lower himself onto Duo's rigid length.

"Ahhh," moaned Duo.

Heero's passage was tight and hot, the muscles gripping Duo's length firmly as he slid slowly inside Heero's body. It was a tight fit and Duo was biting his lip and gritting his teeth in an effort not to come as he finally seated himself completely in Heero's passage. It had been a while since they had made love, Heero's trying out for the team and lack of time being the main factor in that. Duo hadn't wanted to jeopardize Heero's chances in any way and then getting kicked in the thigh hadn't helped either.

"Feels so good," Heero whispered in Duo's ear and then nibbled on the lobe. "Make love to me, Duo."

Duo was happy to comply and carefully began his retreat, Heero assisting by levering himself up a little as Duo pulled out. Water began to splash around the two bodies, spilling to the floor as their lovemaking found a rhythm, but neither man cared. Heero was completely lost in the sensations of Duo sliding in and out of his passage, stroking his inner walls and stimulating the sensitive nerves within.

Violet eyes closed as Duo gave himself over to the feelings coursing through his body. Each
movement, withdraw and successive plunge back took him higher and higher. Heero's inner muscles
caressed his length, squeezed around the head of his cock and sucked him deeper. The heat was
incredible, the pleasure overwhelming and Duo happily sank into it all.

The pleasure couldn't last though and each man found himself soaring towards the inevitable,
reaching for the edge and teetering on the brink before falling over into oblivion. Duo was the first to
succumb, Heero a few seconds behind him, shooting his milky seed into the cooling bathwater while
Duo's seed filled his passage. Sated, they slumped against each other and rode the waves of their
respective orgasms, pleasure filling them both and leaving them happy and fulfilled.

Heero was the first to stir and gently eased himself from Duo's lap. He could feel the evidence of
Duo's passion leaking out of his rear end and he quickly washed himself off before cleaning Duo as
well. Sleepy violet eyes greeted him and a soft kiss was stolen.

"I think we should get out now, the water's a little on the cool side," Heero said quietly.

"I agree. Bed sounds like the perfect place to be," Duo replied a little fuzzily.

Together they climbed out of the tub and toweled each other off. They managed to make it down the
hallway to the bedroom and while Duo turned the bed down, Heero checked the house was locked
up before tumbling naked into bed beside his sleepy lover. Instantly, long arms wrapped themselves
around Heero's waist as a warm, naked body pressed against his back, Duo spooning behind him.
Heero grunted softly and folded his own hands across his lover's before closing his eyes and drifting
into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

A week had passed since the camp and life had returned to its normal routine. Heero had given Zero
a couple of days rest, something the gray was happy about and the stallion spent his time grazing in
the paddock. Heero caught up on all Duo's accounts and paperwork whilst enjoying a bit of a break
himself, he also took the opportunity to do a little more work with Shini. The colt had been neglected
a bit of late with Heero concentrating on qualifying for the team selection and then with his broken
arm as well.

Zero was now back in work, just light work for the moment, Heero deeming the stallion didn't need
any more jumping practice for a week or two when he decided it was high time to move onto the
next phase in Shini's education. He voiced his intentions to Duo over dinner one night.

"Duo?"

"Yes?"

"I want to back Shini tomorrow." [1] As expected there was silence from his lover. "Duo?"

"Are you sure he's ready, Heero?"

"As ready as he's ever going to be. I've lunged him and he knows all the voice commands for walk,
trot, canter and halt. He's been long reined and short reined, he's used to wearing a saddle and bridle
so the next step is to get on him." [2]

Duo frowned. "Are you really sure, Heero? I don't want you getting hurt again this close to the cup
competition. Maybe it would be better to leave backing Shini until after the cup."

"If I leave it until after the cup then I won't have the time, I have to return to work at Treize's and I'll
be pushing to find the time to keep Zero fit without having Shini to work on too."
"You'll still have to work him though, even after the cup competition, if you back him now."

"Yes, but not as much. I can back him and do some basic ground work with him and then turn him out for six months to finish maturing. Once I bring him back into work it should only take a few days for him to remember everything."

Duo knew there wasn't any point in arguing, Heero had already made his mind up. "All right, you win. I guess this means you want me to help you?"

"If you don't mind?"

Duo shook his head. "I don't mind. Someone has to be there to pick up the pieces." The words were accompanied by a teasing smile.

"Thanks." Heero gave his lover a deep kiss.

The following morning, Heero had Shini in the small yard and had just finished tightening the girth when Duo appeared. Heero double checked that everything was fitting okay and not pinching anywhere before fetching his helmet and putting it on.

"What do you want me to do?" Duo asked.

"All I need is for you to hold him and talk to him. I'll put my foot in the stirrup and get him used to feeling my weight there. Once he's comfortable with that I'll lie across the saddle."

"Gotcha."

"If he's still okay with everything I'll sit astride him. It's important for you to keep talking to him and reassuring him that everything is okay. If he's still doing well I'll get you to lead him a few steps around the yard."

"Okay."

"Good. Let's get started then."

Duo stepped into the yard and took hold of the lead rope Heero had attached to Shini's halter that was still in place under the bridle. The colt regarded him with impassive eyes, preferring to chew on his bit. "You be a good boy now, Shini," Duo said as he petted the colt's neck.

"All set?" Heero asked as he carefully pulled the stirrups down.

"Yep."

Shini cocked an ear back to listen to what his master was up to, the other ear focusing on the human that held him and spoke soothingly to him. Shini remained calm, there wasn't anything to fear. His eyes moved around and then he shifted slightly as he felt an unfamiliar weight press to one side of his body. The soft tone of the human at his head reassured him that nothing was wrong.

Heero slipped a foot into the stirrup and grasping the pommel of the saddle he rested some of his weight in it. The colt moved a little, Heero following and keeping the weight on the stirrup. Shini settled again and Heero added his own pats and praise to Duo's. After repeating the same thing a few times and Shini accepting it all calmly, Heero decided to move to the next step.

"I'm going to lay my weight across him now, Duo. He's probably going to shift sideways and possibly forwards at first. Keep talking softly to him though and all should be okay."
"Will do," Duo replied and fished in his pocket to produce a carrot for the colt. Shini took it eagerly. He loved carrots!

With Duo's calm words, Shini remained still. Heero put his weight in the stirrup again, only this time he pushed himself off the ground completely and lay on his stomach across Shini's back. The colt shifted uneasily, stepping to the side as the unfamiliar weight rested on his back. When the weight remained, Shini tried moving forward but was stopped by the nice human who patted him and spoke reassuringly to him. He also got a mouthful of carrots. Shini stopped his movement and adjusted his stance to accommodate the extra weight.

"Good boy, Shini," Duo praised as he fed the colt carrots. "You're just like your old man, you know. He loves carrots too," Duo stated softly. "I bet you would do anything to have them, just like Zero," Duo continued to say. It didn't matter what words came out of his mouth, Duo knew Shini wouldn't understand, it was the tone he used that got through to the colt.

Heero repeated the motion several times until Shini was quite happy to remain still as Heero leaned over him.

"Almost finished," said Heero as he slipped to the ground. "This time I want to sit properly on him. Once he's settled and happy with that, I'll get you to lead him around the yard for me."

"Okay." Duo fed the colt a few more carrots. "You be good now, Heero's going to get on you properly and I want you to behave. No trying to chuck him off, I've had enough of accidents and injuries to last me the rest of my life," Duo said quietly to the colt.

Shini didn't care, all he wanted was more carrots and if putting up with the humans' strange behavior was going to get him more carrots then he was happy to comply.

Heero carefully put his foot into the stirrup again, pushing his weight off the ground and then pausing before slowly and gently easing his leg over Shini's rump and sitting softly in the saddle. He remained relaxed with his legs hanging loose at Shini's sides.

The colt laid back both ears and tried to turn his head to see what was happening. It felt uncomfortable and threw his balance out with this extra weight on his back. He hunched his back a little and tucked his tail down. All the colt's natural instincts were telling him that this was a predator and he should be doing his best to get rid of the weight on his back; but the weight hardly moved and didn't show any sign of trying to hurt him. The human holding him kept patting and praising him, feeding him carrots and making a big fuss over him.

Shini was confused. He didn't know whether to buck, rear, try to run away or accept what was happening and have more carrots. Duo could see the colt's unease and lavished more praise on him, Heero began to stroke along the steel gray neck before him, adding his own reassurances to Duo's. Sensing no danger, Shinigami began to relax, his back softening and accepting the weight upon it.

"Good boy. That's right, Shini, just relax," Duo cajoled as he fed the colt more carrots. Heero was just thankful they weren't sugar lumps. Given the amount the colt had already consumed if they had been sugar then he would have been worrying about the state of Shini's teeth!

"I think we can try walking him a few steps now, Duo. Just keep a hold on the lead rope, talk to him and tell him to walk on. I'll stay as still and relaxed as I can."

"Okay. Come on, Shini. Walk on," Duo said softly as he tugged gently on the lead rope.

Shini took a hesitant step forward and tried to balance himself. The added weight to his back, even
though it remained still, had to be compensated for. A few more steps followed and with each one, the colt's confidence grew a bit more. Once they had completed a circuit of the yard, the command to halt was given and the colt stopped. Immediately he was presented with more carrots and lots of praise.

Heero was pleased and carefully dismounted, slipping his leg over Shini's back and landing softly on the ground so as not to startle the colt. "That will do for today. He's done really well," Heero said as he petted the colt. While Duo continued to talk to Shini, Heero set about removing the gear. Once Shini was unsaddled, Heero took him out to the paddock. Leaving the lead rope on the gate, Heero headed back to the house and some lunch with his partner.

Stepping through the back door after removing his boots, Heero was met by a very excited Duo.

"Heero! Mail's in and there's an official looking envelope for you. I think it's the paperwork for the team." Duo was practically bouncing on the spot.

Taking the envelope, Heero scanned the outside, noting the E.F.A. logo. He sat down on one of the kitchen chairs, Duo beside him and opened it. A letter and sheaf of papers spilled out. Heero picked up the letter and read it, it was from Noin and contained the basic information for the cup competition as well as further congratulations. He passed the letter to Duo and began to fish around through the rest of the papers. There was a wealth of information there and Heero's head began to spin with it all.

Duo read the letter, the smile on his face growing wider before he put it down and took a look at what his lover was doing. He gave a soft chuckle at the bewildered look on Heero's face. "A bit confusing is it?"

"You could say that," replied Heero. "There's so much here and half of it I don't think really relates to me."

"Let me take a look." Duo frowned as he went through the paperwork. "I see what you mean. Heero?"

"Hai?"

"You wanna give Treize a call and see if he's got his letter yet?"

"I can do that."

"And ask him if we can call around and go through all this lot with him? I'm sure he will have a better understanding of it all and be able to explain what we actually need to know out of all this."

It was Heero's turn to chuckle and he leaned over to give his lover a kiss. "I think that's a good idea, Duo."

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something like a girth that goes around the horse's girth area. One rein is slightly shorter than the other and applies more pressure to one side of the mouth and thus the horse turns that way. Short reining teaches the horse that when pressure is applied to one side of the bit the horse turns that way and then the pressure is relieved.
Chapter 50

Heero returned from making his 'phone call, Duo met him with a coffee and question in his eyes. Heero took the coffee and sipped at it before speaking. "Treize got his paperwork today too. We can call around later tonight after consults and he'll go through it all with us."

"Great. I don't know about you, Heero, but it's rather confusing to me."

"I'm finding it all a little confusing too, and I'm supposed to be able to understand all this!"

Duo couldn't help but laugh. "Look at us, Heero. A degree in accounting and a degree in vet science and between us we can't even figure out the paperwork for an International event."

"You got that right," Heero chuckled. "Maybe if we had a physics degree we would be able to make head or tail of it."

"Nah, you need one of those to conquer Nrobbuts."

Heero snickered.

* * *

Evening consults passed quickly and when Duo returned to the house, Heero had done the horses and cooked dinner. A plate of apricot chicken and rice awaited the vet, the aroma tickling Duo's taste buds and he was quick to devour the food, praising Heero's culinary skills. With dinner out of the way, Heero collected all the paperwork together and washed up while Duo took a quick shower. It wasn't long before they were on their way to Treize's.

"Good evening, Heero, Duo," Treize greeted the pair. "Please, come in." Treize opened the door wide to admit the two men. "Follow me through to the lounge, I think it would be best to discuss this in there, it's warmer."

Duo and Heero followed the taller man along the hall and into the lounge. A blonde figure rose from the couch to meet them.

"Hey, Zechs!" Duo said as soon as he spotted the other vet.

"Duo, Heero," Zechs responded and shook both mens' hands. "Congratulations, Heero. Treize tells me you also made the team."

"Thank you, Zechs. Yes, I made the team."

"All I can say is watch out the rest of the nations, with both you and Treize in the team it will be a formidable one to beat."

Heero blushed at the compliment.

Treize felt the awkwardness and smoothly changed the subject. "Did you bring the paperwork with you?"

"Hai, I did," returned Heero and produced the envelope.
"Good. I'll grab mine and we can go through it all together, that way we can cover all bases and explain whatever you're not sure of. Please, take a seat. Zechs? Would you mind getting our guests something to drink, please?" Treize disappeared into his office to fetch his own paperwork. Leaving Heero and Duo in the capable hands of Zechs.

"What would you like to drink?" Zechs asked as Heero and Duo sat on the two seater couch.

"Soda would be nice, if you have it," replied Heero.

"Same for me, thanks," Duo said.

Zechs fetched the requested sodas and handed them over. Duo was amused by the easy way Zechs moved around Treize's home; it would appear the blonde vet had been spending a great deal of his free time at Treize's.

Treize returned with his own paperwork in hand and sat on the couch opposite, Zechs sliding beside him. "Let's take a look shall we?" Treize sifted through the papers, discarding the ones they didn't need for the moment. "What exactly is it you're not sure of?"

"I get the information sheet, the one that gives us directions, stable allocation and accommodation. It's the program and entry forms that I'm not sure of."

Flipping through the papers again, Treize located the ones Heero was talking about. "Okay. Putting aside the entry form for the moment, let's start with the program. The program itself covers all the events that will be taking place over the four days. The opening is scheduled for the Thursday morning with a grand parade and introduction of the teams competing in the Nations cup. That afternoon there are to be displays by the local pony clubs of quadrille dressage. There's also a Grand Prix and Freestyle dressage competition that afternoon. Friday has the C grade and A grade showjumping championships, as well as the pony club mounted games. There's also the State A and B grade speed jumping championships in the afternoon. Saturday signals the start of the Nations cup and we will jump our first round that afternoon. There's the Puissance jumping that night and a few other events happening. Sunday will see the finals of the pony club mounted games and the final round of the Nations cup. Once that's over it will be the grand parade and presentations." Treize paused and flipped over a couple of sheets of paper.

"The entry form for the Nations cup is more a formality thing. Noin will have already entered the team, the purpose of the form is for the official program and the commentator. You will need to fill it out with yours and your horse's details along with a bit of background information. They like to give a spiel on each rider, something along the lines of when you first started, where you got your horse, what you have achieved so far in competition."

"In other words, they want a condensed version of your life," muttered Heero.

"Just be sure to leave out the juicy bits, Heero," Duo snickered.

Treize laughed. "Somehow I don't think they would appreciate it if you were to put in all your secrets."

"No, I don't think they would," replied Heero dryly. "Why the other forms though?"

"Heero? Have you thought about entering Zero in the A grade championships? Or one of the speed events?" Heero shook his head. "No, I hadn't."
"You have qualified to compete if you wish to."

"Are you?"

"Yes. I'm planning on entering Goose in the A grade championship, I'll give the speed ones a miss. I figured if I'm there, I may as well have a go."

Heero chewed over that in his mind for a moment, the temptation to enter Zero in the championships was strong, but then Heero thought about the traveling, the stress of settling into a temporary stable, not to mention the pressure of the Nations cup and all the jumping Zero had done lately.

"What do you think, Heero?" Duo asked. Duo had his own ideas, but kept them to himself, this was Heero's decision and no concern of his.

"I don't know," replied Heero slowly. "It's tempting, there's going to be a lot of good horses out there competing, but..."

Duo had a pretty good idea where Heero's thoughts were heading and he smiled in encouragement.

"I really don't want to over stress Zero. I think there will be enough pressure on us both to perform well in the cup competition and I'd rather have Zero fresh and jumping his best for that. Besides, it might give the other Nations an edge, if they see us jumping prior to the event, they will get a pretty good idea of our horses jumping styles and capabilities. No, I think I'll stick with just the cup event."

Secretly, Duo was pleased. He thought there would be enough pressure on the pair as it was, without the A grade competition as well. There was also less risk of Zero or Heero being hurt before the main event. Given that Heero had jarred his still healing arm on the last day of the camp, Duo didn't want to tempt fate and have his partner out of the team for something that could have been avoided. There would be other A grade championships, but there may never be another chance to ride for your country.

"That's fine, Heero. You don't have to enter anything else, it's not compulsory, just an option if you wish to take it. A lot of people are traveling long distances so they try to give you as many events to enter as possible and make the trip worthwhile." Treize shuffled the papers again. "If you're not intending to compete in anything else, all you need to do is fill out the form for the commentators and program, post it off to the address given and that's all."

"Thanks." Heero shuffled his papers around and brought the one he would need to the fore to be filled out at home.

The four sat in silence for a couple of minutes, each one turning over different things in their respective minds. Zechs broke the silence.

"Forgive me if I sound completely ignorant here, but this Nations cup, how exactly is it run? What happens? How do they score it and know who the winner is?"

Duo gave a silent sigh of relief. He'd been wondering the same thing. Heero had given him a brief outline of what the event entailed, but he'd forgotten most of it and it had only been a simple and short explanation anyway.

Treize smiled and took his lover's hand in his own. "It can be quite complicated when you look at it from the E.F.A. Regulations book, but I'll see if I can't put it into easy terms for you."

"That would be appreciated," replied Zechs with a raised eyebrow.
Duo snickered. It appeared he wasn't the only one who had trouble understanding the technical terms associated with showjumping.

"The Nations Cup is an official team competition. Its object is to compare the merit of competitors and horses from different nations. The cup team consists of four riders each riding the same horse throughout the competition. Quite often, teams coming from countries far away are allocated horses from the host nation to ride to save on the expense of transporting horses internationally. It isn't cheap and then there are the quarantine laws as well."

"That makes sense," Zechs muttered.

"All team members compete in the first round where the scores are added together to give a team score. After the first round, the best six teams go through to the second round. Once the second round is completed, the scores for the best three are added to the scores of the best three in the first round to give an overall team score for the two rounds."

"So you're saying that even though there are four members per team, the worst score can be dropped?" Zechs asked.

"Yes. Hypothetically speaking here; imagine I score four faults, Heero eight, Zoe, none and Alex fifteen. Alex's score would be dropped and the remaining three added together to give a team score of twelve penalties."

"Ah, I get it."

"If there is a tie for first place, two teams being equal on penalties, then there will be a jump off between one rider from each team. The coach selects which of their team will be the one to compete in the jump off. If the jump off results in equal penalties again, then it comes down to the time taken to complete the jump off course."

"Makes more sense when you explain it that way," Zechs said and smiled.

"How do you know what order the teams are jumping in and in each team, who's jumping first etc?" Duo asked.

"There's a ballot done before the competition starts. The ground Jury and each Nation's coach attend and all the names of the nations are put into a hat. One by one they are pulled out and that's the order for jumping," answered Heero. "It's the team coach that selects the jumping order for the members."

"Noin will allocate us each a number; one, two, three and four. All the teams' number ones jump first, then all the number twos and so on. If you make it through to the second round, the order is reversed. The fours go first followed by the threes and so on." Heero looked to Treize for confirmation, the other man nodding.

"Anybody know what nations are competing?" Zechs said.

"Should be in the paperwork," replied Treize.

Heero and Duo began to sift through Heero's paperwork, as Treize did the same.

"Found it," said Duo and held up a piece of paper. "According to this the teams entered are from Australia, New Zealand, Japan, England, Germany, Sweden, Italy, France and South Africa."

"Hmmm." Treize's brow furrowed as he studied the list of countries entered.
"Why the frown?" Heero questioned.

"This is going to be a really tough competition. I remember several of these riders from the Olympics."

"It is supposed to be an International event, and you would expect the nations to be putting forward their best riders," stated Duo.

"That's correct. I'd say the Germans and Kiwis are going to be really hard to beat."

"Why those two countries?" Heero's interest was piqued.

"Germany spends a lot of time and money on its equestrian teams. They have the best instructors, as well as access to International courses and jumping competitions. Being in Europe, they also have access to some of the finest horseflesh ever bred."

"Isn't that why Relena imported Peacemillion and those mares? To improve the blood lines here in Aussie and give potential International riders good horses to choose from as competition prospects?" Heero said.

"Yes. Although it will take a while for Peacemillion's influence to be seen on the equestrian front. Meanwhile we still have to choose between what's available here, breed something yourself or foot the bill to purchase a top animal from overseas. All of which are equal in the success ratings."

"Wouldn't the Kiwis have the same problems though as the Aussies. New Zealand is just as isolated as Australia," Duo said.

"Yes, they do. But recently they've had a lot of success with crossing thoroughbreds with warm bloods. Don't underestimate the New Zealand team, they have a lot of talent in their riders."

"Sounds like it's going to be quite the 'affair' with all these International competitors here," Zechs mused.

"It is a big affair," replied Treize. "After the Olympics, the Nations Cup event is the next largest and hardest competition in the equine world."

Heero sat back on the couch and let the conversation continue around him. He was honored to have been chosen to represent his country at this level and determined to do his best. The size of the whole affair was just beginning to sink home and Heero felt the first of the butterflies begin to gnaw at his insides.

After another hour or so of conversation and having a much clearer understanding of the forms, competition and all the paperwork, Duo and Heero had bade their friends goodnight and returned to the practice.

* * *

Over the course of the next few days, Duo helped Heero with Shini again, the colt being much more relaxed with each 'lesson' and Heero was now able to walk him around the small paddock without Duo leading him. Taking his time and teaching the colt all the basics had paid off and all Heero had to do was combine the voice command with the corresponding hand and leg aids, Shini slowly picking up on what was required of him.

When Heero wasn't busy with the horses, and Duo free from the practice, they spent their time sorting out what they would need to take with them to Sydney. Not only did they have Zero to pack
for, but themselves as well. Duo put his foot down at the amount of gear Heero had suggested they take for Zero. With the experience of the camp still fresh in his mind, Duo took it upon himself to draw up a rough list of the things Zero would need. He gave the list to Heero and they went through it together, trimming down or adding in where necessary. Despite Treize's offer for Zero to travel down in the gooseneck with Duck and Goose, Heero was adamant about towing his horse himself. Treize could understand and didn't push the issue. Knowing how Heero did tend to over pack a little though, Treize offered to take the bulk of the feed stuffs in the gooseneck and give Heero more room in his car for other gear. Heero had agreed, seeing the logic in that. Duo had managed to sneak behind his lover's back and organized with Treize to take a bit more than just feed, some of Zero's gear would be traveling with Treize and free up more space in Henrietta.

Once the gear was settled, next came the mapping out of the route they would take to get to the show. Heero wanted Zero to arrive as fresh as possible and thus give the stallion the best chance of performing at his top. They could have made the trip to Sydney in one day, Duo calculated it would mean driving for roughly twelve hours with another four hours added on for fuel stops, rest breaks and the opportunity to take Zero off the float and let him stretch his legs. Heero didn't want to stress the horse out any more than necessary and had opted to do the trip in two days instead.

A friend of Trowa's lived on the way and had a small farm holding. Trowa had contacted his friend, Albert, and the man had offered to have Zero stay overnight in the barn, Duo and Heero being welcome to stay overnight in the house with the rest of the family. Heero had thanked Trowa and now the traveling was finalized.

They would leave on the Tuesday morning and take their time driving, breaking every two hours to take Zero off the float for a bit of a rest, stretch of his legs and check all was well. They planned to arrive at Albert's farm around four in the afternoon, giving Zero a couple of hours in the paddock to relax before stabling him for the night. They would set off early Wednesday morning and reach the equestrian center around two in the afternoon.

By arriving early, they would be able to find Zero's stable, familiarize themselves with the layout of the center and get everything unpacked and stowed. The hotel they had been booked into was only a block away from the facility so they would still have plenty of time after settling Zero to find their hotel and settle themselves.

Treize was planning on driving down on the Tuesday and should be there when Heero and Duo arrived. Joe was traveling with him and would be in charge of Duck and Goose. Zechs was only able to get four days off and would be arriving on the Friday to watch his lover compete. Joe intended to sleep at the stables with the horses, he didn't want any escapades from Short Duck, day or night and had arranged to stay in the grooms’ quarters on the grounds. That left the room booked for Treize free for Zechs to be able to stay.

With all the travel plans sorted out, all that remained was for Duo to finalize the care of his practice and for Heero to get someone to take care of Scythe and Shini during their absence. Hilde had already offered to run things practice-wise so Duo would be free to go with Heero and as much as Duo didn't want to impose on the female vet again, he really didn't have much choice.

"Are you sure you don't mind, Hilde?"

"For heaven’s sake, Duo, how many times do I have to tell you I'll be fine, I don't mind doing it in the least. If I didn't think I could run things and take care of the clients then I wouldn't have offered," Hilde snapped. "Catherine will be in reception and it's only an extra five shifts so quit worrying."

"Hilde and I are more than capable of running things in your absence, Doctor Maxwell," Catherine chipped into the conversation. "It's not that hard to do."
"I know that, but I still feel as if I'm imposing on you both."

"It's no imposition, Duo." Hilde shook her head. "It's coming into the quiet time anyway, there won't be a lot of patients. We're coming into winter, not spring, so there won't be the stress of having to attend animals in trouble giving birth."

Hilde did have a point. With the arrival of spring the practice found itself swamped with calls from farmers to small animal breeders, all having the same problem; an animal having difficulty giving birth. Winter usually heralded the start of things slowing down as many people didn't venture out doors and thus their animals avoided a lot of the possible ailments.

"You'll only be gone eight days, I'm sure we can run things for that long and not sink your practice for you," Hilde chuckled.

Duo gave her a 'look'. "Are you sure?"

"Sure about what? Sinking the practice or being able to keep it afloat without the captain at the helm?" Hilde teased.

Shaking his head, Duo knew he was defeated. Hilde crowed over the victory, Catherine smiled.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure to keep her in line, Doctor Maxwell," said Catherine and gave the female vet a fond look.

Duo noticed the look and immediately his mind was ticking over. He opted to stay silent though - for now. He'd observe a little more before drawing any conclusions, but if what his mind was processing combined with what his eyes were seeing, it could be possible that there was a budding romance there. He made a mental note to ask Trowa a few subtle questions when he got the time.

"All right, ladies, you win. I trust you both to keep the practice running in a professional manner while I'm gone, but..." Duo looked from one to the other. "When we return I want you both to take a couple of weeks holiday."

"Deal," replied Hilde.

"Fine with me," came Catherine's response.

"Right, now, back to work."

* * *

Heero was staring at the 'phone, debating with himself whether to make the call or not, and if he did, what he was going to say? He knew Trowa and Quatre would most likely look after the horses for him while he was gone, but he hated to be a burden on anyone. Heero's philosophy was that he wanted the horses and therefore it was up to him to look after them.

He jumped suddenly as the 'phone rang. Picking the receiver up, he answered. "Maxwell Veterinary Practice. Yuy speaking."

"Heero!"

"Quatre?"

There was a soft laugh down the line. "Yes, it's me, Heero. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Quatre. And you?"
"Doing great."

"Did you want Duo? He's up at the surgery right now, I can transfer you through to him if you like?"

"No, that's fine. It was you I wanted to speak to."

"Oh?" Heero couldn't think for the life of him what Quatre could want.

"Heero?"

"Hai?"

"With you having made the team and all, and Duo hopefully going with you to the competition, Trowa and I were doing some thinking." The blonde paused for a moment and Heero wondered what was coming. "We were wondering if you had organized for someone to take care of Scythe and Shini while you're away?"

"Actually, Quatre, I haven't organized anyone yet..."

"Good." The blonde interrupted. "Trowa and I would like to offer our services, if that's okay with you."

Heero chuckled.

"Is there something wrong, Heero?"

"No, nothing's wrong. To be honest, Quatre, I was sitting here wondering how to approach you and Trowa and ask if you would mind looking after the pair for me. Seems you've beaten me to it."

It was Quatre's turn to laugh. "We enjoyed doing it for you before and we don't mind doing it again. We wouldn't have offered otherwise."

"Thanks, Quatre. That means a lot to me, I know I can go and compete without having to worry about the other two. They will be in good hands."

"It's mine and Trowa's pleasure, Heero. It makes a change from the usual routine, it's also good for de-stressing."

Heero had no doubts about that. There was something about caring for a horse that calmed you, whether it was their patient attitude, the way they didn't demand anything from you or simply the company of a four legged friend, Heero didn't know, but it certainly helped to take the stress from your life, and Quatre had a lot of stress to deal with.

"Thank you, Quatre. I appreciate it. Tell Trowa thank you too."

The conversation continued on for a little longer, Quatre asking about feeding, the usual routine of the horses and a few other questions, all of which Heero was happy to answer. Eventually Quatre made his goodbyes and Heero hung up the 'phone. It seemed all was coming together nicely for his trip away. Now all he had to do was make sure that Zero and himself gave all they had for their country in the competition and bring home the cup for Australia.

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"This is a pain in the ass!" growled Heero and tossed his pen to the table in frustration.

Duo suitably tisked and picked up the pen. "It's not that hard to write a bit about yourself, Heero."
"Yes, it is." Heero pouted. He didn't want to be writing up this summary on himself. Why did they have to have this information anyway? Surely it was an invasion of privacy or something like it.

As if sensing what was going through his partner's head, Duo snickered. "No, you can't write something like 'I bought my horse from a friend and decided I wanted to be a champion and here I am', they want to know a little of your background and before you think of pleading insanity to the courts or suing for invasion of privacy, think about your fans."

"Ah? I don't have any fans, Duo."

"Oh yes, you do, Heero." Duo moved in behind his lover and nibbled on Heero's earlobe. "You have Hilde, Catherine, Trowa, Quatre, half the practice clients and - me." The 'me' was accompanied by a lick to Heero's throat.

Heero moaned softly "Guess you're right."

"You wouldn't want to disappoint them, would you?" Another lick.

"Ah, no, I suppose not."

"Good. Now let's see if we can't come up with something interesting." Duo pulled away leaving Heero feeling cold from the loss of the warmth.

Between the two of them they eventually managed to come up with a short spiel. It took several screwed up pieces of paper, one broken pen and a few frayed nerves, but at last the thing was done. Duo looked at it with satisfaction and tucked the pen behind his ear.

"I'd say that's the best we're gonna get, Heero."

"I really don't care, I'm just glad it's finished," replied Heero.

Duo took a moment to scan over the page. "I'll copy this onto the form sent with the paperwork and post it off for you if you like."

"Thanks, Duo." Secretly, Heero was glad Duo was doing the writing, he was completely fed up with the entire issue; besides, his writing wasn't the best. Duo's writing though was neat, tidy and easily read.

It took Duo a few minutes to copy the 'spiel' onto the form and once done, he found an envelope, got Heero to sign in the right place and sealed it in the envelope before Heero could change his mind.

With the necessary paperwork now out of the way, Duo felt like relaxing. "Fancy going for a ride, Heero?"

Blue eyes found violet. "What sort of ride?" Heero questioned. With his long haired lover's enjoyment of playing with words, Heero never knew what to expect.

"A ride on the horses, Heero," Duo returned dryly. "Why? What sort of riding were you thinking of?" he added with a leer.

Heero blushed deep red.

Duo shook his head, an amused smile on his face. "We can do the other riding later."

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Chapter 51

Time had flown by for Heero and Duo, the weeks leading up to their departure for the cup event passing so fast that Duo was wondering exactly where the time had gone. With Hilde and Catherine all set to run the practice and Trowa and Quatre ready to look after Shini and Scythe, everything was organized and all that remained was to pack the gear they would need for Zero and themselves.

Heero had put his car into the local garage and had it fully serviced, he didn't want to take the chance of mechanical failure. Similarly he'd had the horse float serviced. The tires had been checked and rotated, brakes replaced and linings flushed; even the floor mats had been taken up and the floor inspected for any wear and tear that might result in Zero getting hurt. The tow hitches on both float and car were checked and finally Heero was satisfied he'd done all he could to ensure the safety of his horse, Duo and himself.

Tomorrow they would be setting off for Sydney. Heero's mind was abuzz with all the last minute preparations. Currently he was sitting on the floor in the middle of the tack room, list in hand, sorting through the mountain of gear and separating it into piles; stuff he needed and things he didn't. So involved in his task, he didn't hear Duo come in.

"Anybody alive under there?" Duo's cheeky voice rang out.

"Fuck!" Heero cursed as he dropped the body brush on his shin.

"You okay, Heero?"

"Yeah, I'll live," replied Heero as he managed to crawl out from within the pile of horse gear.

Duo snickered. "You have cobwebs in your hair."

"Just so long as there aren't any spiders to go with them," replied Heero.

"Not afraid of a little, bitty spider, are we?"

"No. More like the big hairy ones, something like the one just above your head," came Heero's retort.

"Arrrgghhh... Where?!" screamed Duo and lunged forward into Heero's arms.

Heero couldn't help it, he broke into laughter, the tears streaming down his face as Duo bent himself in almost impossible ways to try and see the spider Heero had mentioned.

"Bastard! There isn't any spider!" huffed Duo and did his best to smooth his rumpled clothing and ruffled pride.

Heero continued to laugh, the mirth slowing to a few snickers under the glare Duo was sending him. "I'm sorry," he managed to get out. "I didn't think you were scared of spiders."

"I'm not," came the clipped reply.

"If you're not then what the hell were you doing screaming and jumping into my arms?"

"Self preservation?"
Heero snorted.

"Maybe I just wanted a cuddle?"

"You could have asked."

"Where's the fun in that?"

Heero shook his head, seemed he was losing this verbal sparring match as well. He decided to change the subject. "What was it you wanted?"

"I came to see if you'd finished sorting out Zero's stuff and had the things you wanted Treize to take ready so I can run them over for you."

"Ah," Heero turned and looked at the growing stack of gear. "Umm... I've still got a bit to do."

"No shit," replied Duo sarcastically. "Geeze, what have you been doing in here for the past two hours? I thought you'd have it all ready to pack by now."

After the camp and Duo's experiences with Heero and the amount of gear he'd tried to take, it didn't surprise the vet to find his lover in such a state, despite the list they'd worked out.

Heero sighed. "Want to give me a hand?"

"I think I'd better, otherwise you'll still be here next week."

"Thanks."

Duo set to work, his mind knew well enough by now what sort of things Heero usually took with Zero to a show so he didn't bother with the list. It didn't take him long to have the gear sorted into one pile, the things they wouldn't need being put back into the tack shed.

"I'll carry on going through this lot if you want to sort out the feed stuffs you're going to need," Duo said as he eyed the pile of horse gear.

"Okay. Thank you, Duo." Heero stole a kiss and disappeared into the feed shed.

With a sigh, Duo set about sorting through the tack, stuff they would need en route as well as other gear was placed in one pile while things such as a spare rug, jumping boots, spare bridle, stirrup leathers and girth were placed in a separate pile to be taken in Treize's truck. Since Heero was intending to float Zero himself, Treize had offered to take any extra gear as well as Zero's feeds, hay and carrots for the time they would be away. There was plenty of extra room in the goose neck float Treize used to transport his horses. The goose neck was capable of transporting four horses, but only Goose and Duck would be in there so there were two spare horse bays besides the large groom's compartment where the gear was usually stowed.

Heero had readily accepted the offer, knowing there was no way Henrietta would cope with the amount of stuff he would need for the eight days away. Heero had decided to take the feeds he would need for Zero with him rather than risk trying to buy feed once they got to Sydney. He grabbed a pile of empty bags, counting out eighteen empty bags. They would be away for eight days and Zero would need two feeds a day. Therefore Zero would require just fourteen feeds, the first and last feeds being given at home, but Heero didn't want to take any chances and would rather have a few spares in case he needed them. He'd already arranged with Treize for the other man to take a couple of bales of hay so the large part of the haynet situation was taken care of.
Heero began to measure out the feeds for his horse into buckets and then empty the buckets into the feed bags before starting again until he had all eighteen bags filled. Once complete, Heero grabbed several lengths of binder twine and began to tie off the bags, making sure they were tightly tied so nothing would spill out of them. When he was satisfied, he began to carry the bags out to the main breezeway of the stables where Duo had almost finished sorting through the gear.

“All done?” Duo asked as he looked up from what he was doing, namely packing all the grooming tools into their respective bag.

“Yeah. I'll keep three feeds with us and the rest can go with Treize. Which is the pile for Treize?”

“That one.” Duo pointed to a large pile.

“All I need to do now is put a few spare biscuits of hay into a bag to replenish Zero's haynets on the trip and that's it.”

“Good. I'm nearly finished here. Once you've got the hay ready I should be done so I'll get you to give me a hand to pack this lot into Camel and I'll take it to Treize's while you pack Henrietta.”

Heero resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the names Duo insisted on giving different inanimate objects. So far the horse float had survived the naming fixation; but Heero didn't know for how much longer. “Okay,” he replied and disappeared to finish off with the hay.

* * *

Treize looked up from where he was removing the saddle off a chestnut horse's back as Duo's car pulled into the stable yard. He couldn't hold the snicker as he noted the amount of gear that surrounded Duo in his car. It would appear Duo was playing the part of delivery boy for Heero. Treize handed over the chestnut's care to a stable boy and walked over to where Duo was escaping his vehicle. "Afternoon, Duo. Looks like you're a little over loaded there."

"Hey, Treize." Duo shot a glance back at his heavily laden car. "I guess you could say I'm a bit on the full side."

"Is all that Heero's stuff he wants me to take for him?" Treize raised an eyebrow and gave an amused smile.

"Yeah, it is." Duo rolled his eyes. "When it comes to going away, Heero doesn't like to leave anything to chance. Personally I think he's being paranoid."

Treize laughed. "You sure he wasn't a boy scout at some stage?"

"Wouldn't surprise me." Duo couldn't help the grin. "You sure you're gonna have enough room to take all this for Heero? It won't leave you short on space, will it? I know you have two horses yourself to pack for and if there's not enough room I understand, you have to put your own horses and gear as priority. I'm beginning to ramble, aren't I?"

Shaking his head, Treize gave an amused snort. "Duo, I'll have enough room to take Heero's stuff as well as my own, there's no problem with that; and yes, you're starting to ramble."

"Sorry," Duo gave a sheepish grin.

"Come on, I'll give you a hand to get it all out and packed into the goose neck. If you want to take your car around the back of the stable complex, the goose neck is around there. Otto is packing it with the gear for Goose and it won't take long to put Heero's stuff in as well."
"Thanks, Treize." Duo hopped back in his car and drove around to the back of the stables where Treize had told him to go.

Otto stepped out of the groom's compartment and smiled as he spotted Duo pulling up. "Hello, Doctor Maxwell," he said politely.

"Hey, Otto," Duo returned as he got out of the car.

"I see you've brought Heero's stuff."

"Yup."

"Does he have anything at all left at home?"

Duo laughed. "Not a lot, no."

Otto joined him in laughter.

Treize appeared at that point and didn't need to ask what all the laughing was about, he could tell from the look on the men's faces. He shook his head. "Nearly finished with the gear for Goose?"

"Almost done, boss," replied Otto. "I've only got the hay bales and feeds to put in."

"Great. Duo, we can put all of Heero's spare gear in the groom compartment and then the feeds can go in the back of the truck with the ones for Goose and Duck."

"Thanks, Treize."

"Come on, I'll give you a hand otherwise you'll be here until the cows come home."

An hour later all the gear that would be needed was neatly packed away into the goose neck and there was still plenty of room. "I think we should give you some petrol money, Treize," Duo said with a sigh. "It's going to add a few dollars to your fuel bill carting all that extra weight of Heero's stuff."

"It's no problem, Duo. I'm happy to help out. Would you care for a drink before you go?"

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'd better get going. We still have our own clothing to pack and I've got evening consults to do. I'll take a rain check if that's okay?"

"No worries. I'd better get moving myself. I've still got another horse to work before dinner and then there's my own gear to finish off packing. Jenny was going to do the majority of it, but I don't like to take advantage of her."

"You're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. I'm driving straight through and should arrive at the grounds in the early evening."

"We're stopping overnight at a friend of Trowa's. He's got a small farm holding and is happy to put Zero up for the night. We should arrive around mid afternoon on Wednesday."

"I'll most probably be around the stables so I'll keep an eye out for you."

"Thanks, Treize." Duo walked over to his car and went to climb in. "I guess we will see you on Wednesday then."
"Drive carefully and tell Heero to take his time floating that horse down," replied Treize.

"Will do." Duo got into his car and left.

Treize waved and then turned back to Otto and the last of the preparations for the trip away.

* * *

Evening consults had gone smoothly for Duo, Heero manning the reception area to give Catherine a night off before she and Hilde would take over the reins for the eight days the pair would be gone. Many of the clients knew of Heero's success in being selected to represent his country and while most of them professed to knowing nothing at all about equestrian competition, they were all as proud as punch to have 'one of their own' selected for such an important event. During the course of the evening, Heero received a non stop flow of good wishes from the many clients, and not just those booked in for a consult; the 'phone was ringing off the hook too.

When the last client left, Heero was more than happy to switch the 'phone over to answering machine mode. Not that he was averse to having people wish him luck, if anything he was embarrassed by the sheer volume of good wishes; he'd no idea he and his horse were so popular. No, he was tired and his head was beginning to ache from all the calls, not to mention he'd hardly had any time at all to enter all the evening's consults data to Nrobbuts' filing system. While Duo cleaned up the consulting room, Heero quickly loaded the last of the information into the database and shut down the computer. Wearily he ran a hand over his eyes and sighed. Pushing himself up from the chair, he went into the reception room and tidied up the magazines, put chairs back where they belonged and fetched the broom to sweep the floor before mopping.

Ten minutes later the pair had finished, Heero emptying out the bucket and standing the mop up against the outside wall while Duo checked everywhere was locked and turned out the lights. Heero waited outside the back door as Duo flipped off the last light switch and secured the practice, setting the security alarm and closing the door.

"I think we deserve a coffee," Duo said as he laced his fingers with Heero's and walked back towards the house.

"I agree," replied Heero.

"Got much left to do?"

"No. All my clothes are folded and on the bed. I thought once you'd finished sorting yours out we could pack them all into one case."

"Sounds like a plan." Duo gave Heero's hand a light squeeze. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired, happy and scared shitless."

Duo's face broke into a broad grin. "You'll be fine, Heero."

Entering the house, Heero went to make the coffee while Duo sorted out his own clothing and added it to the pile Heero had folded neatly on the bed. Duo smiled as he spotted Heero's riding outfit hanging inside its protective, plastic 'bag' on the door handle of the walk in robe. He let his mind wander for a moment, visualizing Heero all dressed and on his horse, the crowd silent as they tackled the course of jumps. A warm feeling grew in his chest and a lump began to form in his throat knowing how much his partner was loved and supported by their small community - and that Heero had chosen him to spend his life with. Despite all the public attention, having to share Heero with the many supporters, Duo didn't mind; after all, it was his bed Heero slept in every night.
"You okay?"

The soft voice drew Duo from his thoughts and he turned to find Heero looking at him, mugs of coffee in his hands. "I'm fine. Thanks." Duo took the offered mug.

"What were you thinking about?"

"Just how damn proud I am of you and Zero; and how lucky I am to have you love me."

A soft smile found Heero's lips and he leaned close, brushing those lips over Duo's. "I'm lucky to have you, Duo. If not for you I don't think I would have made it this far."

"Ah, bullshit," Duo replied, his cheeks flushing.

"It's true. It must have been fate that day I competed at the Ag show and Zero fell. I owe you big time for fixing him up, if you hadn't been there and quick off the mark, Zero probably wouldn't be competing today."

"And I wouldn't have his gorgeous, sexy rider in my bed."

Heero chuckled. "I love you, Duo."

"Love you too, Heero."

"You almost finished sorting out your clothes?"

"Yup. Just gotta get my socks and underwear."

"Who said you need underwear?" Heero ran a possessive hand over Duo's backside.

Duo moaned. "If I don't wear any, you won't be able to concentrate on your jumping and I don't want to be held responsible for your lack of attention causing the team to lose the cup. Besides, my jeans will chafe if I haven't got anything on underneath."

"I'd kiss it better for you."

Duo could feel his resistance softening and his cock hardening and he moaned again as Heero's hand wormed under the waistband of his pants and continued to slide over his cheeks.

Sensing victory, Heero managed to put his own mug down and then take Duo's from nerveless fingers. His mouth began to feather kisses over any piece of exposed skin he could find, his hand, the one that wasn't down the back of Duo's pants, began to work on the button and zipper of said pants.

Mind and logic having deserted him, Duo gave in to his need and desire. He let Heero slowly strip him of his clothes and gently lower him to the bed. Clothing that had been piled there ready to pack disappeared and Duo didn't care. Legs were parted, a tongue traced over firm thighs leaving fire wherever it touched. Duo's eyes were closed as he gave himself over to the sensations.

A finger teased Duo's entrance, soft words were whispered in his ear, Duo vaguely hearing them.

"Let me love you, Duo."

"Please."

The finger disappeared and then returned before Duo had a chance to bemoan the loss. This time it was slick and slippery, as Heero had managed to locate the lube, he teased Duo's tight hole and then
pushed gently inside. A second and then third finger followed, Duo's body welcoming each extra digit and stretching to accept the intrusion.

All fatigue seemed to leave Heero as he prepared his lover. Knowing that the next few days would leave them with precious little time to be alone together, Heero was determined to take advantage of the moment. Duo was naked, spread open beneath him with a warm blush bathing his creamy skin. With his fingers still working the muscles of Duo's channel, Heero managed to worm his way out of his jeans and underwear. Heero coated his cock in lube, as he deemed Duo ready for him and withdrew his fingers.

Moaning softly at the loss, Duo blinked open his lust filled eyes to see what Heero was up to. He spread his legs wider as Heero sank between them and positioned himself at Duo's entrance.

"Let me love you?" Heero asked again, wanting to be certain that Duo was okay with this.

"Love me, Heero. Love me long and slow."

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Heero began to press forward, slowly his cock breeched the entrance and slid inside. Heat immediately surrounded him, stealing his breath and leaving him panting, grimly hanging on to the last shreds of sanity as he fought to stop himself from coming right then. Eyes closed, a low groan rumbled through his chest as Heero steadily sank into the heat and tightness of Duo's sheath.

The slow burn of penetration made itself known as Heero entered his body. Duo closed his eyes and willed himself to relax. He drew upon the memories of the last time Heero had taken him, remembering that it had hurt a little at first, but then the pain had gone to be replaced by unadulterated pleasure. He hung onto that thought as Heero stilled and his body adjusted to the invasion. Steadily, the burn receded until Duo was left with nothing more than an ache, a longing for more. He rolled his hips.

Taking that as his cue, Heero began to retreat, sliding cautiously from within his lover's channel and then slipping back inside. He made sure to go slow, giving his partner every chance to stretch and accommodate him. As Duo's passage softened around him, Heero picked up the pace a little. He found a rhythm, steady and sure, keeping his thrusts deep and slow as he began to torment both himself and the vet with his gentle lovemaking.

Heero slipped his arms under Duo's shoulders, buried his head in the crook of Duo's neck and pulled his lover close. Slick skin moved against slick skin, Heero's hips continued in a slow, steady thrust as his lover began to raise his own pelvis to meet him.

"That's it, baby. Nice and deep," Duo murmured as he pushed up to meet Heero's inward thrust. His passage had stretched and now demanded more of Heero's length, clinging desperately as Heero withdrew and then opening greedily to welcome that thick shaft back inside as Heero pushed forth again. Duo's nails raked over Heero's back as his pleasure built. He trailed his hands down to Heero's backside, caressing the strong muscles of his lover's buttocks as they flexed with the effort of driving his cock inside Duo's body. A small shift in position and Heero's cock hit Duo's prostate, the vet unable to hold the cry of pleasure.

Despite the slow pace, each man found himself rising higher and higher. Heero pushed himself up a little and managed to work his hand between their sweating bodies to curl around Duo's cock and stroke. The small shudders and trembles that passed though the flushed body beneath him told Heero that his partner wasn't far from release, which was a good thing seeing as how Heero was almost there himself. The rippling of muscles inside Duo's channel was steadily driving Heero to the point of no return and he redoubled his efforts to bring his lover off.
"So hot, so tight," Heero groaned. "Can't, I'm going to..."

"Come for me, Heero." Duo squeezed his passage to add weight to his words and was rewarded with a strangled moan as Heero gave in to his body's demands. Warmth spread from his groin to his toes, body going rigid as his orgasm took him to heights unknown.

Feeling the wet heat of his lover's seed coating his insides, Duo worked his own hand between their undulating bodies to wrap around Heero's hand and encourage him to continue in his stroking. Heero's orgasm had almost completely robbed him of any physical movement and it was with great effort he managed to keep going and bring Duo to his release. Heat burst forth, Duo crying out with the force of his climax as he sank into nirvana.

They collapsed against each other, holding tight and enjoying the sensations that flowed through them both. As sanity began to return, Heero slipped from inside Duo and rolled to the side, Duo following and seeking the warmth of his partner. Soft kisses were exchanged, Duo nuzzling into Heero's chest as his mind slowly returned.

"As reluctant as I am to move, we really need to get cleaned up and finish off the packing. It's getting late and we want to get a good night's rest before setting off tomorrow," Heero sighed.

"I know," Duo murmured. "A couple more minutes?"

Heero chuckled and pressed a kiss to Duo's forehead. "A couple more minutes," he agreed.

* * *

"That's everything?" Heero asked as his eyes roved over the contents of the car.

"Yup. I've ticked off everything as I put it in and I've double checked. All that's left to do is put Zero's float boots on, haynet inside and then pop him on the float."

"Water bucket in there?"

"Yes."

"My helmet? Clothes? Boots?"

"Yes, yes and yes."

"Feeds for tonight and tomorrow?"

"Yes. And lunch for us. Heero, if you don't shut up and get your horse ready the show will be over before we even leave!"

Heero gave his partner a sheepish grin. "Sorry."

Duo kissed the rider. "Look, I know you're nervous, but everything is packed. We even have spares for the spares, now. go get Zero ready."

Heero left to do as Duo said.

"If he's that bad when going to a show, I dread to think what he'd be like at his own wedding."

Duo spun around as the words were spoken. "Trowa!"

The young man nodded. "We thought we would drop over and see you both off, oh, and wish Heero
good luck again."

"We?"

"Quatre's just coming. He stopped by the paddock to say hello to Scythe, Catherine's with him and so is Hilde."

Duo's face broke into a broad grin. He was touched that their friends would call to wish Heero all the best, especially as it was early in the morning. Duo knew that Quatre hated getting up before eight so for him to be here at seven to say goodbye had to mean something. Speaking of the other three, Duo's face lit up further as they appeared around the side of the stables.

"Morning, Duo," Quatre greeted.

"Morning, Quatre, Hilde, Catherine," Duo replied. The blonde Inspector didn't look as if he was completely awake yet and Duo held the snicker as Quatre yawned, confirming the fact.

Heero could hear voices outside as he finished putting on Zero's floating boots. He clipped the lead rope to Zero's halter and led the gray out of the stable and into the early morning sunshine. Spotting the group all congregated around the car and float, Heero couldn't help but smile. "Looks like the fan club has arrived to see us off," he told Zero.

Zero wuffled and nudged his master. He knew something was in the air, he could sense it.

"Heero!" Quatre called out as the rider and horse approached.

"Morning, everyone. To what do we owe this pleasure?" Heero asked, already knowing the answer.

"We thought we would drop by and wish you all the best again, oh, and wave you off," replied Quatre.

Heero smiled. He was touched by his friends' support. "Thank you."

Duo dropped the tail gate of the float as Heero brought the stallion around. Everyone gathered close, patting the gray and feeding him carrots.

"You be good, Zero," Hilde said as she offered a carrot.

Zero took it gently and blew through his nostrils at the woman.

"Look after Heero," added Catherine as she also offered a carrot.

Quatre fed the stallion a few carrots and gently patted the firm, gray neck. "Bring home the cup, boy."

Zero replied by rubbing his nose against Quatre's chest.

"Do your best, Zero," Trowa said as he pulled gently on the stallion's ears.

"I hate to break this up, people, but we really need to get Zero loaded and hit the road if we're to make it to Albert's farm tonight," Duo said softly.

Everyone stepped back and let Heero load his horse. With Zero in the float and munching happily on his haynet, Trowa gave Duo a hand to raise the tail gate and secure it. Heero reappeared from inside and bolted the small, front door before turning to face his friends.
"Take care, Heero," Quatre said as he gave the rider a hug.

"I will."

"I know you will do us proud, Heero." Trowa shook the rider's hand. "Good luck and don't worry about the other two nags, Quatre and I will take good care of them."

"Thanks, Trowa. I really appreciate you both looking after them for me."

"It's our pleasure."

Heero turned to where Catherine was waiting. The young receptionist went to shake his hand but then changed her mind and shyly gave him a hug. She pressed a kiss to his cheek and stepped back, a blush tingling her cheeks. "Good luck."

Heero gave her a warm smile. "Thank you."

Hilde eyed him up and down. "Aww... What the heck." She darted forward and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tight. "Take care of yourself and that horse, Heero. Do your best and show the rest of the world what us Aussies are made of."

Heero was a little stunned but reciprocated the hug. "I'll try, Hilde. You look after the practice while we're gone."

Stepping back, Hilde brushed a couple of tears from her eyes and then smiled softly as Catherine put her arm around her shoulders. Hilde drew closer to the warmth and comfort the other woman offered.

Seeing that the emotion was starting to run thick, Duo stepped in. "Geeze, anyone would think we were going to a funeral!" he quipped. It was the tension breaker they all needed. "Come on, Heero. We need to get moving."

"Hai. Thank you everyone," Heero said, his eyes amused by the sight of Hilde and Catherine and he made a mental note to question Duo about that later.

Duo turned to the assembled group. "Thanks for stopping by. I know Heero appreciates it. Look after things while we're gone and I'll call you all once we get to Sydney." Duo turned to face Trowa who was standing with his arms around Quatre's waist, the blonde's back against Trowa's chest. "I'll call you tonight to let you know we've arrived at Albert's. Any problems, you have my number."

Trowa nodded.

Duo jumped into the passenger side of the car and buckled up. He rolled down the window as Heero started the car. Easing his foot off the clutch and accelerating, the car and float began to move, Heero waved out the window to the remaining group as he moved off down the driveway. Out in the paddock, Scythe and Shini neighed, Zero answered from inside the float.

Trowa, Hilde, Quatre and Catherine all waved madly back, calling out 'good luck' as they watched the car and float disappear down the long drive. Duo hung out the window waving back as Heero began to concentrate on driving.

Once they were on the road, Duo wound the window up and settled into his seat. Opening the glove compartment, he grabbed a few papers and the road map. Locating the directions he'd scribbled down, Duo flipped open the map to the page he needed and traced the route they would be taking. He glanced out the window at the passing landscape for a moment before turning his attention back
to the map.

"Sydney, here we come!"

~ * ~

tbc...
“There should be a picnic spot up ahead,” Duo said as he studied the map. “About another two kilometers,” he added to give Heero something to work with.

“Thanks.”

They had been driving for quite a while and were making good time. Heero wasn’t pushing the car, just cruising along and taking it easy. So far the car and float were holding up fine and Heero was glad he’d had them both fully serviced before leaving. This was the longest trip he’d ever undertaken towing the float and wasn’t sure what to expect from Henrietta. Short distances were an entirely different thing to long ones. So far the motor was running fine, the temperature gauge staying where it should and the float remained balanced behind the car.

They’d stopped about two hours ago for coffee and to take Zero off the float. The stallion had enjoyed stretching his legs and picking at the grass at the side of the small general store car park Heero had turned off into. Duo had purchased the coffee’s and asked if they had a tap around that he could use to fill up Zero’s water bucket and give the horse a drink. The woman behind the counter had been very helpful, and once she found out that Heero was Sydney bound to represent his country, she insisted on giving the pair another coffee each on the house to take with them. She’d also thrown in a couple of apples for Zero and insisted on feeding them to the stallion, much to Heero’s horror. Heero knew what Zero was like with apples. Luckily for the woman, she had another customer to serve before she had the chance to feed the first apple properly to Zero and had to leave just as the horse was beginning to slobber and drool everywhere.

Heero hadn’t been quite so lucky.

He’d ended up wearing a lot of the drool.

Now it was getting close to lunch time and Duo had picked up on a picnic spot not far ahead where they should be able to enjoy a peaceful lunch and give Zero another break. Hopefully it would have toilets as well.

Heero spotted the blue and white sign that indicated the turn off to the picnic spot five hundred meters ahead at the same time Duo did. He took his foot off the accelerator and let the car slow down naturally. Indicating, he pulled off the main highway and along the side road that would take them to the picnic area. Bringing the car and float to a smooth stop, the pair glanced around as Heero cut the engine.

There were a few wooden tables scattered about, large rubbish bin to one side and glory be, a toilet block. Heero was pleased to see that, not just because he needed to go, hell he could pull over and pee in the bush, but it meant there would be running water - water for Zero.

Leaving Zero in the float for the moment, Heero grabbed the water bucket and set off for the toilet block. Heero was pleased to see that, not just because he needed to go, hell he could pull over and pee in the bush, but it meant there would be running water - water for Zero.
the moment, Heero wandered over to where Duo had set out their lunch on one of the wooden tables.

"Zero okay?" Duo asked as he passed Heero the container of sandwiches he'd made that morning before leaving.

"He's fine," replied Heero as he took a sandwich and bit into it.

"Soda?"

"Thanks."

The pair ate in companionable silence, both enjoying the sounds of the bush around them. It was peaceful with just the noise of nature. A soft breeze blew and the sun shone overhead. It was warm, but not uncomfortable and that made Heero happy. Both he and Duo were fine in the car, but if it were much hotter, Zero would be rather uncomfortable in the float.

Finishing his sandwiches, Duo grabbed a piece of cake and munched happily. He was feeling more relaxed than he had in a long time, this break was just what the doctor ordered, even if it wasn't technically a vacation. "You sit and relax for a bit, Heero. I'll remove Zero's float boots and take him for a bit of a walk around before we set off again."

"Thanks, Duo." Heero picked up his can of soda and took a long drink.

Zero was nibbling at his haynet, it was clear he wasn't overly interested in it, he'd rather be exploring the area they were currently parked in. He nuzzled the nice human and politely took the offered carrot.

"Good boy, Zero," Duo said softly as he patted the gray neck. "Let's get these float boots off you and take you for a walk around. I'm sure you're tired of standing in the float all the time." Duo removed the boots and rubbed Zero's legs, pleased to note that there was no swelling in the cannon bones. Untying the lead rope, Duo led Zero around the picnic area, letting the horse sniff and stop as the mood took him. They found a patch of grass and Zero began to graze.

Having spent a good hour at the picnic spot, all three were feeling much better and Heero decided it was time to move on. Duo cleaned up the remains of their lunch, put the rubbish in the trash and repacked the cooler into the car. While Duo was busy cleaning up, Heero cleaned out the float and then reloaded Zero, making sure the stallion had plenty of hay in the net to keep him busy.

"Would you like me to drive for a while?" Duo asked as they prepared to leave.

Heero smiled. "If you don't mind." Truth was, Heero was getting a little tired from all the driving, it was a strain, not only on the eyes, but the mind as well. Normal driving over long distances could be wearing, but when you were towing a float as well with a living creature inside, your senses had be twice as alert.

"I don't mind in the least." Duo got into the driver's seat and adjusted the mirrors to suit before turning the key and setting off again. He'd checked the map before leaving and had a pretty good idea of where they were going, but he passed the map to Heero and went over it with his partner just to be sure.

* * *

The landscape continued to roll past, Heero watching it through the window. The radio played softly in the background adding to the relaxed mood. They'd been back on the road again for a good two
hours and judging by the map, they should be around five kilometers away from Albert's farm. Heero glanced at his watch; three fifteen looked back at him. Good. They should arrive at Albert's somewhere in the next fifteen minutes which would mean that Zero would be able to spend a few hours in a paddock before being brought in for the night.

So far the stallion had traveled well and Heero was pleased about that. He was also pleased he'd decided to do the trip over two days. Judging by the way things were going so far, Zero should arrive fresh and be able to give his best for the competition.

"I think that's the turn up ahead," Duo said, breaking into Heero's thoughts.

Heero looked up and found where they were on the map. "Yeah, it is. Take a left and then the road to the farm should be the second on the right."

Duo indicated and slowed down, making the turn at almost a crawl. Once around the corner he began to accelerate steadily, passing the first turn and then slowing again as the second came into view. Having made the second turn, Duo began to look around for Albert's farm.

"According to Trowa's map, it should be about half way down this road on the right."

"Does it have a name?"

"Uh, yeah." Heero flipped over the piece of paper Trowa had given him with Albert's 'phone number on in case they needed it. "Darling Downs."

Duo snickered. "Did Trowa say what this Albert farms?"

"Sheep, I think."

"Ewe think?" Duo chuckled.

Heero opted to ignore the joke and focus on finding the farm. They passed several open fields with sheep grazing in them when Heero spotted a farm house in the distance. "That might be it," he said and pointed to the house.

"You could be right," Duo replied and slowed down as he approached a break in the road that signified a driveway. Bringing the car to a stop, Duo gazed out the window at the white gates. 'Darling Downs' was emblazoned across them. "This is it."

Heero got out and opened the gates, waiting while Duo drove through and then shutting them again. He hopped back into the car and they drove slowly up the gravel drive. The house appeared ahead, the drive forking with one part disappearing behind the house while the left fork continued around the front. A shaggy collie appeared and began to bark as Duo stopped the car. Moments later the front door opened and a middle aged man stepped out onto the wide verandah.

Heero got out of the car as the man stepped down to greet him.

"Shut up, Buster," the man said firmly and the collie stopped his barking. "You must be Trowa's friend, Heero," he said as he offered his hand.

Heero shook the hand. "Hai, I'm Heero, Heero Yuy and this is my friend, Doctor Duo Maxwell," Heero replied as he introduced Duo who had gotten out of the car and walked over.

"Pleased to meet you, Albert?" Duo said as he shook hands with the man.
"Yeah, I'm Albert, Albert Weeks. Trowa said you should be arrivin' around threish."

"Thank you for allowing us to stay here overnight, and for having my horse as well, Mr. Weeks," Heero began. "It makes the trip a lot easier."

"My pleasure, my boy. And call me Albert, Mr. Weeks makes me feel old. Guess you want to get that hoss off the float as soon as possible, eh?"

"Yeah. Zero's been a good traveler, but he could do with a break."

"Right you are. If you want to follow me around back, I'll show you where you can park your car and float and the paddock I got for your hoss to use." Albert whistled for the dog and set off around the side of the house.

"You go with him, Heero, I'll drive Henrietta around," Duo said with a smile. He liked this Albert character.

Heero grinned, he was liking Albert too.

* * *

With the car and float parked, Heero fetched Zero off and led him to the paddock Albert had allocated for them to use. It was close to the house, about two acres in size with a copse of trees in the middle. Lush grass was abundant and a large bath tub full of water stood just inside the gate. Zero was happy with his accommodation too and showed it by snorting loudly and taking a gallop around the fence line. It felt good to really stretch his legs after standing inside the float for so long. After a few minutes of tearing around the paddock, Zero stopped, pawed at the ground and rolled. The sand felt good as it ground into his coat, chasing away the itches. His master had taken his light rug off and Zero enjoyed the freedom. Having rolled and satisfied his itches, Zero settled down to graze.

Albert watched the horse with amusement. While he'd never had a lot to do with equines, sheep being his livelihood, he could still appreciate a nice animal when he saw it; and this was one nice animal. "Guess he's settled down okay," Albert stated.

Heero smiled. "Looks like it."

"Come on, I'll show you where you can stable him tonight, then I'd better take the pair of you in to meet the missus, I won't hear the end of it if I don't take you in soon." Albert turned and with a wink, began to walk towards the large barn.

Heero was even happier with the stable arrangements. Albert had set aside a large loose box for Zero to use. Inside, the floor was covered with a thick layer of straw, a full water bucket sat in one corner and an empty feed bin in the other. "It's perfect. Thank you, Albert."

"No worries. Any friend of Trowa's is a friend of mine," replied Albert. "You want to store anything in here? There's plenty of room."

"Thanks, but there's only Zero's feeds, his traveling gear and rug that really needs to be unpacked. The rest can stay in the car."

"Okay then. You want to sort that out now, or later?"

"I'll do it later. Better not keep your wife waiting," replied Heero.
"Nope, I guess not. Grab your gear from your car and I'll take you to meet the missus and show you where you're sleeping."

Duo was doing his best to hold his laughter. Albert was a great guy. Giving Heero an amused look, he walked out to the car to grab the bag with their overnight things in it. Fishing it out from underneath Zero's rug, he muttered quietly to Heero. "I wonder how Trowa and Albert became friends? Where they met?"

Heero shrugged. "Trowa didn't say, but it does seem a little unusual for them to be friends given the obvious age difference. Trowa's only around twenty five and Albert must be in his late forties or early fifties."

"Guess we can always find out later."

Albert waited for them to get their bag from the car and then led them towards the house. "The missus has been real excited to know you were comin'. We don't get a lot of visitors out this way."

"I guess you wouldn't," replied Duo politely.

Albert stopped at the back door to the house and opened it, motioning for the pair to go inside. Heero and Duo walked into what seemed to be a scullery and looked around.

"This way," said Albert and led them through a doorway into a large, homey kitchen.

Delicious smells were wafting through the air and both men paused to take in the surroundings. A large, wooden table sat in the middle of the room with chairs around it. A 'fridge and chest freezer stood to one side while opposite was a large, old fashioned range. Duo had seen a few like it in some of the farm houses in Salsbury, but even they were fast becoming obsolete, replaced with the electrical or gas stoves. There was something about the old, wood fired ranges though, it stirred a sense of nostalgia in Duo. A slender woman with silver through her hair was wiping her hands on a dish cloth as they stepped inside.

"Rosie, this is Heero Yuy and Doctor Duo Maxwell, Trowa's friends," Albert said as he introduced the pair. "This is my wife, Rosie."

"We're very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Weeks," said Heero as he shook hands with the woman. "I'm Heero."

"It's good to meet you too, Heero," replied Rosie. "And you too, Doctor Maxwell," she continued as she shook Duo's hand.

"Call me Duo, please."

"And you must both call me Rosie." The woman's blue eyes twinkled back at them. "Trowa's told us so much about you both, I feel as if I already know you."

Duo wondered exactly how much Trowa had told them.

"Come, sit down the pair of you. You must be tired after driving for so long. I've got the kettle on and it will only take a minute to make a pot of tea." Rosie ushered them to the large table and then returned with cups, saucers, milk jug and a large cake. The tea pot soon followed and the pair found themselves with a cup of tea and large slice of cake in front of them.

Fortunately for the pair, the conversation was carried on mainly by Rosie, with Albert tossing in a few words here and there. After politely answering a few questions regarding the drive so far, Heero
excused himself and Duo, citing that they needed to take care of Zero's things, check the car and prepare the stable for Zero that evening. Albert also had a few things to finish off around the yard before dinner and with the promise to show them where they would be sleeping after they'd finished up outside, Albert and the two travelers left, Rosie reminding them that dinner would be ready at six sharp.

It didn't take Heero long to get Zero's rugs, feeds and other items from the car, Duo helping him to carry the stuff into the barn. While Duo put the feed into the feed bin and filled a haynet, Heero went to fetch his horse. At first Zero didn't want to come when Heero called him. The stallion was enjoying his grazing in the paddock, the trip having tired him out and he wasn't ready to get back on the float anytime soon. Heero shook his head when he noticed how the stallion was ignoring him. He really couldn't blame Zero though. Heero climbed through the fence and walked across the paddock to get the reluctant animal.

Fifteen minutes had passed since Heero had gone to get the stallion and he still hadn't returned. Duo was starting to get a little worried. Stuffing a few carrots into his pocket, Duo went out of the barn to see what was delaying his partner. When Duo got to the paddock gate, he couldn't help but chuckle. Heero was attempting to catch Zero, but every time he got within a few feet of the stallion, Zero would side step away. Duo watched the little drama for a couple of minutes before he thought he'd better give his lover a hand. Time was ticking by and they would be late for dinner if they didn't move it. Judging by the look on Heero's face as Duo drew closer, his partner was beginning to get more than a little frustrated with his horse.

Zero spotted the other human and cocked his ears. This human usually had something nice for him, but Zero was a little wary, he really didn't want to get back onto the float just yet. Duo could see the animal sizing him up as he approached and he dipped into his pocket, pulling out a few carrots.

Spotting Duo entering the paddock, Heero paused in his attempts to catch Zero. He was hot and annoyed that the stallion was being difficult, and while he couldn't blame Zero, he was still angry.

"Having problems, Heero?" Duo called out as he approached slowly.

"You could say that," replied Heero. "I'm pretty sure he thinks I want to put him back on the float when all I want to do is bring him in for his dinner."

"Can't say I blame him. He must be tired."

"I don't blame him either, Duo. I just want to get him inside and fed. I'm tired too and that dinner Rosie has cooking smells delicious." Heero tilted his head and breathed in the aroma that was floating on the light breeze across the paddock.

"Let me have a go."

"Feel free. It's not like I can explain to him that I only want to feed him, you seem to have more luck with animal language than I do," muttered Heero.

"You start calling me Doctor Doolittle, Heero and I swear I'll shove this carrot where the sun don't shine."

Heero couldn't help it; he snickered - madly.

Duo began to talk in a wheedling tone, holding the carrots out where Zero could see and smell them. "Come on, Zero. It's okay, boy. Your master only wants to feed you, he's not going to put you back on the big, bad float. Well, not tonight anyway."
Zero turned to look at the nice human a little warily. He cocked his ears at the soft tone and lowered his gaze to the human's hand which was outstretched. Zero sniffed.

Carrots.

Sensing victory, Duo stepped a little closer. He took his time, talking softly and offering the carrot to the stallion.

Zero couldn't help himself. He lowered his head and walked up to the nice human, taking the offered carrot and crunching it happily.

Duo fished another carrot from his pocket and fed it to the gray; a third carrot followed and Duo slowly raised his hand to grasp Zero's halter while feeding him another carrot.

Seeing Duo's hand close on the halter, Heero gave a sigh of relief and began to walk over. Zero spotted his master out the corner of his eye and went to step away only to be brought up short by a hand on his halter. Damn! Knowing he was caught, Zero lowered his head and gave the nice human his best, liquid brown eyed 'I didn't do anything wrong' look.

Seeing the look, Duo chuckled. "I'm not going to save you from your master's wrath, Zero. You're on your own, buddy."

Zero snorted.

"Thanks, Duo," Heero said as he clipped the lead rope to Zero's halter. "Come on you rogue," he chastised gently. "Time for your dinner, not that you deserve any after that little performance." Heero turned and began to lead the horse back to the paddock gate, Duo beside him.

With Zero now caught and in the stable, it didn't take long to brush him off and rug him up for the night. Zero was feeling a little guilty about not letting his master catch him sooner and did his best to say 'sorry' by being perfectly behaved while he was brushed and rugged. Had he known his master only wanted to bring him in for his dinner, he'd have galloped to the gate at the first call of his name!

With Zero now settled, Heero took a glance at his watch. Five-thirty. "We have enough time before dinner to go back to the house and see what the sleeping arrangements are," he said to Duo.

"Sounds good to me. Besides, I want to wash up before we eat and it might be an idea to see if there's anything we can help Rosie with."

"Keeping on the good side of the cook, eh?"

"Never know when it could be to your advantage," Duo replied smugly.

Heero shook his head but followed his lover back to the house.

* * *

Heero knocked on the back door out of respect and waited for Rosie to shout for them to come in. Stepping back into the kitchen, Duo inhaled deeply and almost tripped over the duffle bag that was still on the floor by the door of the kitchen where they'd left it earlier; behind him, Heero snickered.

Rosie looked up at the pair as they entered and had to hold her own smile at Duo's trip. "You really should go and put that bag in your room," she said in an amused tone.

"Might be an idea," replied Duo a little sheepishly and blushed.
"Come on, I'll show you through." Rosie wiped her hands on the tea towel and motioned for the pair to follow her. "I hope you don't mind sharing a room, even though this place is quite big, the other two guest rooms are mainly used for storage as we don't get many visitors out this way. We usually only keep the one clean and presentable though should anyone choose to drop in."

"That's fine," said Heero.

"Here you are," Rosie said as she opened the door to a large room.

Heero stepped inside followed by Duo who was carrying the duffle, both men looked around and smiled. The room had a large window to one side, tall boy and dresser on one wall and a walk in robe on the other. A huge, queen sized bed sat against the remaining wall, a bright blue comforter and matching pillows scattered on its surface.

"It's lovely," said Duo with a smile as he turned to face their hostess. "Thank you so much for putting us up."

"My pleasure," Rosie said as she blushed a little under the Maxwell charm. "I'll leave you two to unpack and wash up. I'd better get back to dinner, I don't want it to burn. I'll see you back in the kitchen for dinner in fifteen minutes then." Rosie turned and left the two men alone.

Closing the door quietly, Heero turned around to find Duo had dropped the duffle to the bed and was gazing out of the window. He sidled up behind his partner and wrapped his arms around Duo's waist, pulling his lover against his chest and placing a few teasing kisses to Duo's neck. Duo sighed and leaned back into the embrace.

"It's peaceful, isn't it?" Heero remarked as he followed his lover's gaze out the window to the paddocks that were starting to turn orange under the rays of the setting sun.

"Reminds me a lot of home," Duo replied softly and then shifted. "We should go and wash up."

"Hai, we should." Heero captured Duo's lips in a warm kiss, one that left them both dazed and panting.

"I want more of that later, Heero," Duo murmured softly.


Duo smiled and gave the rider a soft kiss. "Let's get cleaned up."

* * *

Dinner was delicious and Duo couldn't help but compliment Rosie who beamed and blushed under the praise. Heero watched his lover charm the woman with a glint of amusement in his eyes. Duo certainly had a way with the ladies, there was no doubting that. If Heero hadn't tasted that wonderful body and known without a doubt that Duo was gay, he would have had serious trust issues with his partner. As it was though, Heero knew Duo was simply being his natural self.

During the course of the meal, which incidentally was roast lamb, something that Heero and Duo thought quite fitting seeing as how they were on a sheep farm, the conversation turned to Trowa. Neither man was sure how much Albert and Rosie knew about Trowa and his private life, so they kept their answers to the couples questions as neutral as possible. Fortunately, Rosie wasn't one to pry too much, neither was Albert. They mainly wanted to know how Trowa was getting along, if his animal shelter was running smoothly and how Catherine was.
Duo couldn't help himself; after they had answered the questions relating to Trowa, Duo had to find out just how the couple knew their friend.

It turned out to be quite simple.

Rosie explained that she had been a part of the circus many years ago. In fact, she had been one of the trapeze artists in her younger days. Albert joined the circus to take care of the animals and once he met the flying aerialist, he was smitten. They shared a whirlwind romance before tying the knot. During their time with the circus, a young Trowa was starting to become quite adept on the highwire and making a name for himself with his sister as part of the knife throwing act. Rosie had taken the youngster under her wing and taught him what she knew about being an aerial gymnast.

In short, Rosie and Albert became sort of 'foster' parents to both Catherine and Trowa. As Rosie grew older, so her flexibility began to wane and she found herself slowing. Rather than wait until she had an accident, she decided to hang up her tights and let the younger, up-coming gymnasts take over.

Albert was also beginning to show signs of slowing down and so the pair decided to retire. They packed up their gear, left the circus and bought the sheep farm. While they would never become rich from the farm, they had no regrets either. They were comfortable, secure both financially and emotionally and most of all - they were happy. They'd kept in touch with some of the circus folk over the years and had known about Trowa leaving to set up his animal shelter and were in contact with each other every couple of months.

Duo and Heero listened to the tale with rapt interest. It was fun to hear about Trowa and the circus days, the young man himself rarely offered anything by way of information on his background; not that he had anything to hide, it was simply Trowa's way. He didn't like talking about himself, he much preferred to hear about others and keep his own past exactly that - in the past.

With dinner over with, Heero and Duo insisted on doing the dishes. Rosie protested while Albert remained silent. He really didn't mind if someone else wanted to do the dishes, it meant he could have the night off so he wasn't about to argue. Heero and Duo got their way and soon had the dishes cleaned up. Rosie put them away as neither man had a clue where anything went and they didn't like to pry in someone else's kitchen. With the dishes out the way, Heero and Duo were ushered through to the lounge room while Rosie made them all a coffee and Albert fed the dog, Buster.

Sitting in the well worn armchairs, Duo relaxed, enjoying the serenity of the farm and the couple that ran it. Heero was also relaxed, the driving having exhausted him. Albert soon joined them and turned on the television. Being 'out in the sticks' as Albert put it, they were limited in their viewing channels. Cable and satellite television hadn't made it that far out as yet and although Albert had both a DVD and VCR, their selection was also limited. In the end the television became background noise as the four opted to chat instead.

Albert began to yawn at around nine and excused himself. "Sorry guys, but I best be getting off to bed, I have to get up early in the morning and I'm not as young as I used to be. Afraid I need all the beauty sleep I can get."

Duo laughed. "I think we should also be making tracks to bed. We need to be up early in the morning to get a good start on the last part of the trip."

"I'll be up at five so I can give you guys a wake up call if you like?"

"Would six be okay?" Duo asked as he repressed the shudder that wanted to pass through him with the thought of getting up at five.
"I'll give you a call at six then. Good night." Albert shuffled off to bed leaving Rosie to lock up.

"I'll just go and check on Zero before heading for bed," Heero said.

"I'll wait for you to come back in before I lock up then," said Rosie.

"Thank you. I won't be long." Heero got up and slipped out to the barn to check his horse while Duo remained inside and gave Rosie a hand to take out the coffee cups and rinse them through. By the time they had finished, Heero was back.

"Zero okay?" Duo asked as he hung up the tea towel.

"He's fine. Cleaned out his feed bin and almost all of his hay."

"Good." Duo turned to Rosie who was bolting the back door. "Would it be okay for us to take a shower? I'd really sleep much better if I had all this traveling dirt off me."

"Of course. Bathroom's just down the hall a bit, second door on your left after your bedroom."

"Thanks."

"There's clean towels in the laundry cupboard, help yourself. Oh, that's the first door on your right," replied Rosie. "Now, I'm off to bed. I'll see you two in the morning for breakfast before you leave."

"Thank you."

"Goodnight," Rosie said as she turned and went along the hall to her's and Albert's bedroom.

"Night," both Heero and Duo replied and then went in search of towels and the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, both Heero and Duo had taken their showers and were curled up in bed.

"The Weeks are a nice couple, aren't they?" said Duo softly as Heero kissed his jaw and neck.

"Mhmm," was Heero's reply and then he took Duo's mouth in a gentle kiss of love.

When the kiss broke, Duo snuggled deep into Heero's arms, wrapping his own around his lover and listening to the quiet thud of Heero's heart beat as it lulled him off to sleep.

Tomorrow they would arrive in Sydney and the pressure would be on. It would also mean they couldn't show any affection for each other when outside their hotel room. That was something Duo didn't want to think about, Heero either; so for now they would lie comfortably in each other's arms and just enjoy the closeness of the moment - heaven knew when they would next be able to cuddle.

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 53

Albert's knocking on the door and cheery voice awoke them the following morning. Heero yawned and stretched, no mean feat as Duo was curled up against his side, arms and legs wrapped around him.

"Time to get up, Duo," Heero breathed over his lover's ear.

"Don't wanna." Duo burrowed back under the bed clothes.

Heero chuckled and located his partner's rib cage. Gently he began to tickle his fingers over Duo's ribs, making the vet squirm.

"Stop it."

"No."

"Heero, I'm warning you."

"It's time to get up, Duo." Heero continued to tickle.

"I'm already 'up'," Duo snickered and pushed his erection against Heero's stomach.

Heero groaned. "I'd love to take care of that for you, Duo, but if we don't get up now, Rosie will be along and calling for us, or Albert will return and I'm pretty sure you don't want either of them to catch us in a - shall we say - compromising position?"

Duo shuddered and sighed. "Guess you're right." He yawned and stretched, then rolled over to pinch a morning kiss.

When the kiss broke, Heero smiled. "Now that's more like it." Heero got out of the bed and found the duffle bag, rummaged inside and pulled out a shirt and socks.

"Nice view," commented Duo from where he was still lying in the bed, ogling Heero's bent over ass.

Heero flushed red at the comment and quickly straightened up. Grabbing his jeans from the chair he'd dumped them on last night, he pulled them on and did them up before shrugging into the shirt and sitting on the edge of the bed to put on his socks. "I'll go feed Zero while you get dressed," he said as he leaned over his lover and took another kiss.

"Okay. I'll meet you in the kitchen."

Heero nodded, ran his comb through his messy hair and then left the bedroom to see to his horse.

* * *

Duo put a hand over his mouth to hide the yawn as he walked into the kitchen. The clock on the wall said six-twenty; way too early for Duo's liking. Rosie greeted him with a warm smile.

"Morning, Duo."

"Morning, Rosie." Duo found a cup of coffee being pressed into his hands and he gratefully took it.
"Thanks."

"Breakfast should be ready in about another fifteen minutes. Albert and Heero should be back in by then."

"Anything I can help with?"

"You can watch the toast for me, if you don't mind?"

"My pleasure."

Five minutes later, Heero and Albert walked back inside the kitchen. Duo looked up from where he was buttering toast and gave his partner a smile. "Zero okay?"

"He's fine," replied Heero as he went to the sink to wash his hands.

"Breakfast is ready," called Rosie and the three men took their seats at the table. Rosie carried plates across and set them down in front of the men. "Dig in and don't let it get cold," she said in an amused tone at the looks on the faces of their two guests.

Both Heero and Duo looked at the fully laden plates, eyes widening. Bacon, eggs, tomatoes and mushrooms filled the plate to overflowing. With a grin, Duo picked up his knife and fork and dug in.

"This is great! Thanks, Rosie," Duo said around a mouthful of egg.

"I second that," said Heero as he sliced off a piece of mushroom and placed it in his mouth, rolling the flavor around his tongue.

Rosie suitably blushed.

"Looks like the pair of you could do with a good feed," stated Albert. "You're both way too skinny, just like Trowa."

Duo didn't bother to argue, he got stuck in.

* * *

The car had been re-packed, float cleaned out and now all that remained was to put Zero on and they would be on their way once more. Duo gave Heero a hand to put the float boots on Zero and after one last check they had everything and that the stable was clean, he followed the rider and his horse out to the float. Rosie and Albert stood to the side and watched as Zero walked calmly into the float and Duo put up the tail gate. Once Heero emerged from the front they turned to their hosts.

"Thank you again for having us," Duo said as he shook hands with Albert.

"Yes, thank you both. Your kindness is most appreciated," Heero said as he went to shake Rosie's hand and found himself tugged into a motherly hug.

Duo was given similar treatment by Rosie as Heero shook Albert's hand. Rosie passed over a large, brown paper bag to Duo who raised his eyebrows in question.

"Something for you to snack on," Rosie said.

"But, you've already done enough," Duo began to protest.

"Ah, piffle," Rosie sniffed. "Now, be away with you, you have a long way to go. Good luck to you..."
both and when you see Trowa, tell him not to be a stranger and drop in to see us sometime."

Duo smiled. "Thank you again and I'll be sure to pass on the message."

They both got in the car and Heero started her up, the engine firing first time. Zero neighed from inside the float and Heero let out the clutch. Waving to the couple they began their trip down the driveway and back to the main roads that would lead them to their destination.

* * *

Duo knew they were getting closer to their destination as the roads slowly started to become busier. It was one in the afternoon and both were eager to finish their journey. They'd stopped for lunch at twelve, finding another picnic spot and giving Zero a break from the traveling. The stallion was beginning to get tired and showed it by his reluctance to walk back on the float after the break. It had taken Heero ten minutes, a lot of cajoling and several handfuls of carrots before the gray gave in.

The bag Rosie had passed over to Duo contained enough food to feed an army; or so Duo reckoned. There were sandwiches made from the left over lamb roast, slices of ham and egg pie, fruit cake, cookies and a large bottle of soda. Heero had commented that given Duo's appetite it was just as well Rosie had packed a lot of food. Duo retaliated by giving Heero the finger and eating two pieces of pie.

Tracing his finger along the route they were taking on the map, Duo figured that their turn off would be coming up in a couple of kilometers. Judging by the way the open spaces were giving way to more and more dwellings, Duo hoped they wouldn't be too close to the city.

Heero was thinking along the same lines. Only for different reasons. The build up of the traffic was getting worse and add to that the way some people drove and Heero was seriously beginning to wonder how some drivers had gotten their licenses. He muttered a curse under his breath as another car overtook him, honking its horn at Heero's slow speed.

"Asshole!" Duo cursed as the driver sped past. "Don't you realize there's a living creature in the back? Not to mention two in the front that wish to stay alive?!"

Heero snorted.

"Dickheads, all of them," Duo continued to mutter. "Now I know what Trowa meant by city drivers."

"Huh?" Heero gave his partner a glance. "What do you mean?"

"Trowa told me that city drivers are shocking, no courtesy, no patience. I believe him now. After seeing how some of these idiots drive, it wouldn't surprise me if they got their licenses from a Weeties packet!" [1]

Heero almost choked.

"If they're that bad out here in the suburbs, I dread to think what they're like in the city."

"Thank heavens we're not going into the city," replied Heero.

"Amen to that. Oh, next set of traffic lights, turn left."

"Will do."
Another half an hour passed with Heero finding his way through smaller streets on the outskirts of Sydney, Duo directing him easily. The houses began to thin again and along with it, the traffic.

"Should be up this road about five kays. Turn off to your right," Duo said as he consulted his map again.

Heero gave a drawn out sigh. He'd be glad when the trip was over. A large, blue sign appeared on their left telling them that the State Equestrian Center was five kilometers ahead.

"God, I'm good," chuckled Duo as he read the sign.

Heero opted to remain quiet, no point in adding to his partner's swelled head.

The turn off appeared and Heero eased Henrietta and the float around the corner. Both men began to scan the area for the center. It didn't take long for them to spot it. Nestled amongst trees and open fields, a large, cream colored building came into view. Behind it the pair could see more buildings. As they drew closer they could make out the practice areas, stables, yards and the very large parking area. Slowing down to turn into the drive that would lead them to the center, Heero suddenly felt the enormity of the situation dawn on him properly.

He was here - to represent his country.

Where the hell had all the butterflies in his stomach just come from?

Seeing an official looking person up ahead, Heero began to slow even further and wound his window down. As the official stepped forward, Heero brought Henrietta to a smooth stop.

"Do you have your passes?" the official asked.

"Yeah. Hang on a sec," Duo replied for Heero and rummaged in the glove compartment again. He pulled out a small 'wallet' and opened it, getting the necessary paperwork out and passing it to Heero who duly handed it to the official.

Scanning the paperwork and finding it all in order, the official marked something off on the clipboard he was holding before handing the papers back to Heero. "Follow this around to the back of the stables," he began, indicating the road ahead. "Go along the back until you find the block marked 'D'. There's another official there who will tell you where to park."

"Thank you," Heero replied.

"My pleasure and good luck. I hope you bring home the cup for Aussie," the official smiled and then turned to go back to his seat under the tree and await the next vehicle.

Heero eased the car forward again and slowly followed the road the official had indicated. Up ahead he could see the block of stables, on the right side of the roadway were paddocks, on the left, training areas set aside for those who were using the equestrian center. Turning the vehicle to the left, Heero continued down the road, now he was behind the rows of stables. They passed the first block, a large, black letter 'A' painted on the side and continued on until they came to the block marked 'D'. Spotting the aforementioned official to the side, Heero began to bring Henrietta to a stop and wind down his window again. The official looked up and with a smile, got out of his chair and walked over.

"Got your paperwork?" he asked.

The paperwork was duly handed over again, the official looking through and marking off relevant
information on his clipboard. Handing the papers back he began to speak. "Follow this track here on your right, go past all the other floats and cars until you reach the end. There's a guy there who will direct you into a spot where you can leave your float and vehicle. Your stable allocation is 'D21' which is about midway down that block there. Once you've parked bring your gear and horse down there. There's a locker area in the middle of the block for you to stow any gear you want and the number corresponds to your stable number. Any questions?"

"I have one," said Duo. "Once the gear and horse etc are all unloaded and we leave for the night, how do we get back in?"

"Keep your passes with you at all times, they will allow you into the competitors only areas at any time of the day or night. There's security patrolling 24/7 for the safety of both the horses and competitors. No pass, no entry."

"Thanks."

Heero began to let out the clutch again when Duo suddenly yelled out.

"Hey! There's Treize. Treize! Treize!" Duo had by now gotten his own window wound down and calling out as well as waving to the ginger haired man, who hearing his name began to look around and then spotted the pair. Quickly, he walked over.

"You made it okay, Heero?"

"Yeah. Wasn't too bad."

"I'll jump in and go with you to where you're parking, then I can give you a hand with some of your gear. We'd better shift as we're holding up production." Treize indicated to the other cars and floats that were pulling up behind him and waiting for Heero to move so they could get their own precious cargo to the right place and unloaded.

It only took a few minutes for them to drive around the back of the already parked vehicles and find the attendant who showed them where to park. Treize's goose neck was a couple of lines ahead of them as he'd arrived the day before.

"Which stable are you in?" Treize asked as they all exited the car and went to the float to get Zero out.

"'D21'," Heero replied as he lowered the tail gate.

"Good. Goose is in 'D20' with Duck in 'D19'," replied Treize.

"Is everyone else here yet?" asked Duo as he prepared to release the back chain on the float so Heero could back his horse out when he got the word.

"Just Zoe to come and that's it. She's due sometime this afternoon. Noin is here and prowling around. She wants to meet with us all later, once everyone is here."

"Right." Duo dropped the chain as Heero called out he was ready and the gray backed off the float with ease.

Zero's head shot up, his ears pricked and his nostrils flared as he took in all the unfamiliar scents around him. He danced a little as he jerked his head around, trying to see everything at once.

"Might pay to take him for a bit of a walk around, Heero. Let him get a good look at everything and
stretch his legs a bit after being in the float for so long. I'll give Duo a hand to take your gear down and put it in your locker for you," said Treize as he eyed the stallion's excited state.

"Good idea," replied Heero. "You sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. It's more important that you get him settled and happy," Treize said with a smile. He'd competed at big shows in the past and knew how unsettling the atmosphere could be to a horse that wasn't used to such a large scale operation. It didn't matter that they had been to many shows, there was something different about an international level show that seemed to spark something in even the most seasoned horses. Goose was a seasoned campaigner and yet even he'd thrown in a few snorts and danced around a bit when they'd first arrived. Duck had immediately headed for the nearest patch of grass and started to graze.

Heero took his horse for a walk, trying to let Zero see and scent as much as possible whilst getting him to settle down and behave like the gentleman he usually was and not some two year old colt.

Watching the gray tail disappear, Duo turned his attention back to the car and its contents. "Better get started," he muttered. "There's a shit load of stuff to cart down."

Treize simply laughed.

* * *

Finally all the gear was unpacked from Henrietta and most put away in the locker. The more valuable gear such as Heero's jumping saddle, bridle and other bits were placed in the groom's compartment of Treize's goose neck and locked away. While the lockers themselves were sturdy and each competitor put his own padlock on, Treize insisted that the valuable gear be stored in his float. It wasn't uncommon for the odd theft to take place. Treize said the gear would be safer in the goose neck, especially since Joe would be sleeping in the groom's compartment and would know immediately if anyone tried to break in and steal anything.

Duo agreed.

With all the horse gear now gone from the car, all that remained were the bags containing their clothes and Heero's jumping outfit. With no sign of Heero returning yet, Duo filled the water bucket and put it in the corner of Zero's stable, then he fetched a haynet and hung it up in readiness. With everything in place and ready for the stallion's return, Duo found himself with nothing to do. He wandered along the stable block and spotted Firefox, Alex's horse, on the other side of Short Duck's stable. With nothing else to occupy his time right now, Duo sauntered over and spoke to the horse.

* * *

Zero finally began to calm down, the sights and sounds around him no longer causing him any excitement. Heero was pleased his horse was settling, he'd been a little worried that Zero would remain excited and possibly do some damage to himself, especially once they left the gray alone in the stable. Heero knew that Joe would be staying on the grounds and would keep an eye on Zero as well, so should anything happen, Joe would contact him immediately.

Zero was feeling tired, all the traveling was catching up with him; besides, once he'd sniffed the air and checked out the area, there wasn't anything much different to all the other shows he'd been to with his master. He began to look around and try to snatch mouthfuls of grass.

“Come on, Duo will be getting worried about us if we don't get back soon,” Heero said to his horse and tugged lightly on the lead rope.
Reluctantly, Zero lifted his head and nudged his master.

"Ah, there you are, Heero," Duo said as his lover walked into view. "I was getting ready to send out a search party for you."

"Sorry I took so long. Zero wanted to check out everything and I thought it would be best if he got a good look around now rather than wait until tomorrow," replied Heero as he walked up to the stable he'd been allocated.

"It's fine, Heero. Car is unpacked and all your stuff put away."

"Thanks, Duo." Heero tied Zero up. "Ummm... where is his gear? I need to give him a brush over and change his rug."

Duo laughed. "Most of it is in the locker."

"Most?"

Duo elaborated, explaining about Treize insisting on Heero's saddlery being locked away in the goose neck while he showed Heero the locker and assisted him to fetch the things he wanted for Zero.

"Where is Treize?" Heero asked as they returned to the gray, Heero removing the light traveling rug and beginning to give his horse a brush down.

"I think he went to keep an eye out for Zoe. She's the last to arrive. I haven't seen Joe or Alex either, although Firefox is here so I'd guess Alex isn't too far away."

"Right. I'll get Zero settled and then we can go find them," replied Heero as he set about settling his horse.

Duo gave him a hand, pleased to see that Zero was a lot calmer now. With Goose being in the next stable, the stallion settled further. He was old friends with Treize's bay and it made a big difference to Zero having a familiar horse around. Duo mused over that. Horses were gregarious creatures and nothing was better to calm and settle a horse in strange surroundings than having a familiar equine friend around. With Zero safely stabled and eating, Duo and Heero lugged the gear they'd used back to the locker and upon emerging almost ran into Zoe who had arrived and was leading Periwinkle to her stable.

Alex, Charlie and Joe materialized and everyone pitched in to help Zoe with her horse, fetching gear and storing it in Zoe's locker while Zoe and Carol took care of the mare. In no time everything was sorted and the group reacquainted. Treize appeared with Noin and the coach smiled at everyone.

"Glad to see you are all here and that your respective mounts appear to be well. Now that your horses are all settled I suggest we head into the town and get you all settled into the hotel the E.F.A. has you booked into. Once that's done, we will meet in the small conference room where I will brief you all on the program for the next few days, cover all the necessary dos and don'ts as well as answer any questions. Ladies and gentlemen, if you would care to return to your vehicles here is a map of the town and how to get to the hotel from here. I will meet you all in the hotel lobby shortly." Noin handed out maps to each of the riders and then left to make her own way into town.

Heero looked at the map and then handed it to Duo. "Here, you're better at interpreting these things than I am."

Duo took the map with a soft chuckle and looked at it. It wasn't hard to follow. He looked up as
Treize appeared in front of him.

"Any chance of a lift?" Treize asked. "I really would prefer to leave the goose neck hitched to the truck if I can."

"Can't say I blame you," replied Duo. "That must be a swine of a thing to hitch and unhitch." Duo shuddered at the thought. Given the size of Treize's goose neck float the man needed a small 'truck' to tow it.

"I'll be fine for transport once Zechs gets here on Thursday or Friday," Treize added.

"It's fine, Treize. You're more than welcome to ride with us," Heero said. "I suggest we move though, Noin won't be too happy if we keep her waiting."

"Let's go then," Duo said and began to walk back to where Henrietta was parked.

It didn't take long to unhitch Heero's float and within a few minutes the three were on their way back into the town, Duo navigating and teasing Heero about his lack of map reading skills.

* * *

The Hotel Wellington was easy enough to find in the town and had ample parking space. Once the car was secure, Duo shouldered one duffle and Heero the other, Treize followed carrying his own bag. Once inside the lobby of the hotel, they spotted Noin at the check in desk along with Alex, Charlie, Zoe and Carol. The walked over and joined the rest of the group. Noin was sorting out their reservations, getting their respective room numbers and key cards. Once that was done she turned to the group and began to hand out the cards.

"You're all on floor two, rooms eight, nine, ten and eleven. I'm in room twelve. I suggest you all go and put your gear away and then meet me in the coffee shop in the lobby in fifteen minutes."

"Thanks," Heero said as he took the offered key card and looked at the room number. "Eight," he said to Duo who nodded in reply.

The group all moved to the elevators and were soon in the hall that would take them to their rooms. Heero spotted the number eight and stopped. Treize was in number nine, opposite Heero and Duo. Zoe was in eleven with Alex in ten. They all separated and went to check out their rooms.

"Nice," Duo muttered as he stepped into the room he and Heero had been allocated. It was your standard hotel room; two queen beds, dresser, table, television, wardrobe and en suite bathroom. Duo tossed his duffle onto one of the beds and went to check out the bathroom.

Heero dropped his own bag to the same bed and went to hang up his riding gear when a groan came from the bathroom. "Duo? Are you okay?" he asked as he went quickly to the bathroom. A smile graced his features and a chuckle escaped his lips as he saw what the problem was.

"Just as well I brought my own," Duo said as he held up the two small bottles for Heero to see. "Why they can't give you a decent amount of shampoo and conditioner in these places is beyond me. I'd be lucky to get my bangs clean with this measly amount!"

"Not everyone has hair as long as yours, Duo," Heero said as he walked up behind his lover and wrapped his arms around Duo's waist.

"Yeah, well, like I said, lucky for you I brought my own stuff."
“Huh?”

“If this is all they have you'd be lucky to get any at all to wash your hair with once I've finished.”

“We can always raid the housemaid's trolley,” Heero suggested.

“I like your line of thinking, Heero.”

* * *

Noin glanced around at her team, all sitting with a coffee and expectant looks on their faces. “Firstly, thank you all for making the trip here. I trust the accommodation is to your satisfaction?”

Several nods, a couple of ‘it's good’ and one ‘would be better if they had more shampoo’ greeted her. She couldn't help but smile.

“Right, let's get down to business. I shouldn't need to remind you all that you are here representing your country and as such you are expected to behave in a manner befitting an Australian representative. Any misconduct will be severely frowned upon and depending on the nature of such misconduct you could find yourself dismissed from the team and facing disciplinary action from the E.F.A.” Noin paused to see if her words were sinking in.

They were.

“Tomorrow is the opening ceremony and you will all be expected to attend. The grand parade is scheduled for one o'clock and you will ride in formation of four abreast. As we are the host nation this time, you will enter the arena last. The other competing nations will enter first and the commentator will be giving a little spiel on each nation. You will remain at the walk and complete one circuit of the arena before lining up where the steward directs you. The grand parade is expected to take an hour, after which you will exit the arena and return to the stables. Once the parade is over, you're free to do whatever you wish, providing you keep within the rules. I know a couple of you have entered other events and that's fine. You're free to work your horses as you see fit. Those that aren't competing in anything else will be expected to work their mounts and I will be arranging a practice session with you all on the Friday and Saturday. I'll advise you of the time later. Any questions?”

No one seemed to have any so Noin continued.

“I have your saddle blankets in my room which I will distribute to you all this evening. To those of you competing in other events, good luck. Now, I suggest you all get settled in, check your horses and have dinner. You will need a good night's rest before tomorrow.” Noin stood up and departed, leaving the team members and their grooms to talk amongst themselves.

“Guess that means any wild parties are out of the question,” Alex stated with a grin.

“Something tells me you're going to be too exhausted to party,” replied Zoe with a smile.

“Oh, I don't know. I'm pretty sure Noin would let us celebrate once we win the cup,” Alex said with a smirk.

“I hate to remind you of this, but we have to win it first,” Treize said.

“That would be helpful,” Duo mused.

“Well, I don't know about anyone else, but I'm going to take a shower, I need to get all this traveling
dust off me,” Zoe stated and stood up. “I'll probably see you all at dinner if not at the stables.”

“Will do,” a chorus of voices followed her departure.

“Actually, a shower sounds like a good idea,” Heero said softly.

“I think I'll get unpacked,” Duo returned, a small glint in his eye.

“I'm going to have a look around the town. You coming, Charlie?” Alex said as he also stood.

“Right with you,” Charlie replied.

“What about you, Treize?” Heero asked.

“I'm going up to my room to catch a nap before going back to the stables,” Treize said.

“You want a lift back?”

“It would be appreciated if it's no trouble.”

“I'll give your room a call about ten minutes before we're ready to leave,” Heero said as they all got up to leave.

“Thanks.”

“You're welcome.”

The three headed for the elevator and their respective rooms and once inside, safe from prying eyes, Duo proceeded to give Heero a hand in the shower.

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[1] More of our Aussie humor. Getting your license from a Weeties packet translates to a driver that's so bad he must have found his license inside a cereal box (Weeties is a wheat flake cereal here in Aussie), like you get those free ‘toys' in some cereal packets.
The remainder of the day passed uneventfully for Heero and Duo. After taking a shower, a rather long shower due to Duo's insistence he wash Heero's back, which led to washing other body parts and not with a wash cloth either, the pair had emerged a little more refreshed and headed back to the stables with Treize accompanying them.

Zero gave a loud neigh when he heard his master's voice and eagerly searched every available pocket on both his master and the other nice human with hopes of getting some carrots. He wasn't disappointed.

Heero was pleased with how well Zero had settled down, the gray having cleaned out his feed bin and eaten almost all of his hay. Duo refilled the haynet while Heero topped up the water bucket and checked Zero's rugs were all okay and not slipping. Once both men were satisfied that Zero was fine, they joined Treize in taking a walk around the rest of the complex and seeing if they could gather any information on their opposing competition. There wasn't much to find out; the New Zealand team was probably going to be their biggest threat. Treize had done a little 'digging' on the side and managed to come up with a bit of information, mainly on how the respective team members had been going through the last season.

With the horses all settled, there wasn't anything left to do around the stables, so after speaking with Joe, who promised to call Treize before retiring for the night and let him know what the status was with the horses, the three left to return to the hotel and grab some dinner. After dinner, Noin met up with them all and handed over the saddle blankets. Heero took his and gazed at it. It was white with the Australian flag emblazoned in the left hand corner. Heero felt a sense of pride wash through him.

Afterwards there wasn't much left to do. Alex and Charlie went to the hotel bar, Treize accompanied them while Zoe and Carol decided to take a walk around the town. Noin retired to her room after instructing them all not to be too late in going to bed and that she would see them all down the stables at nine in the morning to oversee preparations for the grand parade. Everyone was expected to turn both themselves and their horses out immaculately, presenting in full competition gear.

Duo thanked any god that cared to listen that Heero had chosen show jumping and not dressage as his equine sport. Plaiting the horse's mane was not compulsory for jumping. While Duo was more than capable of plaiting his own mane of hair, applying that skill to Zero's mane was another kettle of fish, and Duo had no wish to learn.

The pair went back to their room to make the promised 'phone call to Trowa and check that all was okay with the horses back home and to let them know they'd arrived safely. Duo had a quick word with Catherine regarding the practice and was pleased to know that all was running smoothly. With the calls dealt with, Heero and Duo joined Treize, Alex and Charlie in the hotel bar where they exchanged stories and compared shows, events and other things equine. Duo found his eyelids drooping around ten and decided to head for bed, Heero followed almost immediately.

Eyeing the two queen beds, Duo raised an eyebrow at his lover. Heero quickly pulled back the covers on one bed and before Duo had a chance to say anything, Heero grabbed him around the waist and tossed him on the sheets.

“I'm not changing my sleeping habits,” Heero offered in explanation and then kissed his lover.
“But what about the other bed?” Duo inquired. “The house maid will know there's something going on when she comes to do the room in the morning and finds only one bed has been slept in.”

“Don't worry about it. I'll pull the covers back and mess it up a bit in the morning,” Heero replied. Duo snickered and placed a kiss to Heero's nose. “Always thinking ahead.”

* * *

The next morning the hotel dining room was a buzz with chatter as many of the guests staying there were involved in the Equestrian games in some capacity. Heero and Duo found the table that had been reserved for their team and quickly joined Treize and Zoe who were already there and eating.

"Joe called and said to tell you he's fed Zero for you," Treize said as Heero returned to the table from fetching his breakfast from the buffet laid out on one side of the dining room.

"Thanks," Heero replied and then smiled as Duo sat down next to him, his plate heavily laden.

Zoe quirked an eyebrow at the amount of food on Duo's plate. "You're not going to eat all that, are you?"

"Sure am," replied Duo with a grin.

Zoe rolled her eyes. "How the heck do you manage to keep such a slender figure when you eat all that sort of stuff?"

"I have a high metabolism." Duo replied. "Oh, and the kind of physical workouts I get keep me in trim too," he added with a wink.

Heero almost choked on his orange juice.

"Wrestling with big beasts is a sure way to burn off a few kilos." Duo glanced at his partner out of the corner of his eye and noted Heero trying to hang onto his composure.

"It must be hard trying to treat some of the larger animals, not to mention dangerous too," Zoe said as she buttered a piece of toast, completely oblivious to the double meanings behind Duo's words.

"It can be," Duo said politely. "You have to keep your wits about you and know how far to push and when to back off."

"I wouldn't want your job for anything," Zoe smiled. "No offense, I think you vets do a marvelous job and deserve medals for some of the situations you must end up in."

"None taken. While it can be hard and dirty at times, it does have its rewards too."

"I'd better be off," said Zoe as she glanced at her watch. "Carol was going to wash Periwinkle before the grand parade and I promised to give her a hand. I'll see you all at the center."

"See you, Zoe," Treize and Heero said, Duo nodded, his mouth was full so speaking wasn't an option.

"Can I cage a lift with you two again?" Treize asked as he stirred his tea.

"Our pleasure," returned Heero and looked at his watch. "Better get a move on, it's eight already and knowing Zero, he's probably lain in something and will need a wash too."
Duo rolled his eyes. "Great! Just what I need after consuming breakfast, to wash a horse covered in shit." he began to turn a little green at the thought.

Heero snickered. "After all the blood and gore you deal with every day and still come in to dinner with a healthy appetite, I'd say a little shit is minor in comparison."

Duo shrugged. "Whatever."

Treize couldn't help but laugh himself. These games were certainly going to be entertaining if nothing else.

* * *

Zero snorted and shook himself, spraying both Heero and Duo liberally with water. "Thanks a lot, buddy. You're on carrot ration from now on." Duo wiped his sodden bangs from his face.

Grabbing the scraper, Heero began to remove what excess water remained in Zero's coat. "We've got two hours before the parade starts. Noin should be here in an hour."

"If you want to sort your gear out I'll walk Zero around to dry him off and then bring him back to the stables to brush him down and finish getting him ready," Duo said as he put all the washing tools away in a bucket. Heero had been right, Zero had managed to get manure stains over his gray coat and being a gray, they showed up - a lot. They wouldn't brush out, leaving behind a tell tale brownish stain when Duo had tried and so they'd had no option but to give the stallion a bath.

"Okay. Thanks, Duo." Heero dropped the scraper into the bucket with the rest of the items and then picked up the bucket to take back with him to the locker. "I'll see you soon."

Untying the lead rope, Duo led the horse away from the wash bay area and to a quieter section at the back of the stable complex. Everywhere you looked there were people and horses, some being ridden, others being groomed or got ready for competition. The place was a hive of activity and Duo found himself fascinated by it all. He was starting to figure out where the other international teams were stabled, mainly by listening to the various other languages spoken around him in passing. He was really looking forward to the grand parade where he would get his first proper look at the horses and riders from the other countries that Heero would be competing against.

Zero found a patch of tasty looking grass and tugged at the lead rope. "Okay, boy. I guess you can have a little pick for now," Duo said and fed out a little more rope. Zero began to graze while Duo continued to watch the activities going on at the center.

* * *

Once the stallion was dry, Duo returned to the stables where all the grooms seemed to be rushing around and getting nowhere fast - at least that's what it looked like. With no immediate sign of Heero, Duo tied Zero up outside his stable and fetched the grooming tools. On the other side of him, Joe was busy brushing down Tall Geese. "Where is everyone?" Duo asked as he set about brushing Zero's coat.

"Meeting with Noin," Joe returned. "They all left about ten minutes ago. I'd say they won't be too long as the Grand Parade starts in forty-five minutes."

Duo whistled between his teeth. "Guess I'd better get a move on then and get you all spruced up, eh, Zero?"

The stallion gave a soft whicker and nudged the nice human.
Duo set to work in earnest. If Heero and Zero were going out there in front of all those people he would make damn sure that both were turned out impeccably.

By the time Heero returned, Duo had finished getting Zero ready. The gray glowed with good health, his muscles rippling beneath his satiny skin. Duo had applied hoof black to the four hooves and brushed out the stallion's tail until it resembled a waterfall of silk. Heero felt his smile increasing as he observed the way his horse had been turned out. Sidling up behind his lover, Heero placed a hand on Duo's shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

"Thanks, Duo. He looks wonderful."

Duo felt himself turning red at the compliment and shrugged his shoulders. "Can't have you going out there in front of all those people and not look your best."

"Hey, Heero," Treize called out from beside Tall Geese. "Better get yourself changed and leave Duo to saddle up. We're expected to assemble in twenty minutes."

"Will do," replied Heero and then turned back to Duo. "I'll go get changed in Treize's float."

"I'll come with you," Duo began and then noticed the look that passed through Heero's eyes. He couldn't help but chuckle and gave his partner a dig in the ribs. "I need to get Zero's saddle and bridle, not jump your bones."

Heero felt himself turning red. It would appear that Duo could almost read his mind - almost.

With another chuckle and shake of his head, Duo turned and with Heero falling into step beside him, headed for Treize's float.

* * *

"They look good, don't they?" Joe said with pride in his voice as he ran an eye over the team that was now mounted and assembling outside the stable block for their final inspection by Noin.

"Sure do," Duo replied and took a few shots on his camera.

The four team representatives all stood in a line as Noin went over them with her eagle eye. Zoe and Periwinkle were first in the line up, the bay mare alert with ears pricked. Alex and Firefox stood next to them, the chestnut's coat glowing almost gold in the sunlight. Heero and Zero were next, the gray standing out amongst his darker companions. Treize and Tall Geese were last, the bay's coat a deep mahogany color and bearing testament to the amount of time Joe had put into grooming him.

Noin had placed the team in such a manner that the gelding, Firefox, was between Periwinkle, the mare and the two stallions. She didn't need any ideas other than the jumping ahead to be on either of the stallions' minds or the mare's for that matter! She ran her eye over each competitor, making certain they were all turned out correctly. After she'd finished inspecting Treize, she turned to the team and raised an eyebrow. "No team mascot?" she said with a look in Treize's direction.

Treize smiled. "Short Duck is still in the stable, but I'm sure Joe would be happy to fetch him if you want a team mascot."

The rest of the team couldn't help but smile or snicker. They were all well aware of the strange relationship between Treize's jumper and the mini pony.

Noin laughed. "I think we should be okay without him. Just as long as your horse does its job and jumps, Treize."
“Goose will be fine during the parade without Duck around.”

“Good.” Noin looked at them again. “I'm really pleased with the way you have turned yourselves and your horses out. You are all a credit to your country.” Turning, Noin faced the grooms who were all gathered behind her. “And all of you are to be commended on the immaculate presentation of your charges. Thank you.”

All the grooms blushed and tried to look anywhere but at Noin or the team.

“Right. It's time to go. Single file as we head into the warm up area where we are to assemble. Lead off, will you, Zoe?”

Zoe nudged the mare into a walk and the rest of the team followed. Duo tagged along with Joe behind the horses, his eyes darting everywhere and taking in all that was going on around him. The rest of the Nations cup teams and other competitors were also filling the warm up area; so many horses, all turned out beautifully.

“Come on,” Joe said to Duo. “Let's go wish the guys good luck and then get to our places inside the arena, we don't want to miss anything of the opening ceremony.”

Duo nodded and followed along to where the team was waiting. He wished Heero good luck, patted Zero and promised the gray his carrots when he came out of the arena. Duo didn't dare give him one now, much to the stallion's disappointment. The last thing he needed was Noin on his back for Zero having carrot slobber on him.

Joe led them into the area set aside for the grooms, flashing their passes at the steward on the way through. A section of the seating had been reserved for the use of the grooms, it was right by the main entrance to the arena, providing them with a good view and yet easy access to the outside for when they were needed by their charges.

Joe found them a couple of seats and promptly sat down. The arena was empty but soft music was playing in the background and the buzz of conversation could be heard all around. After five minutes, the lights began to dim, the music faded and a silence descended on the arena.

“Welcome, one and all, to the Sydney Equestrian Games,” the voice of the commentator came over the PA system. The announcer went on to explain a little of the history of the Equestrian Games and four days of scheduled events. After several minutes he began to introduce the judges for the various competitions being held, thank the sponsors and organizers of the event and then got to the part Duo had been waiting for; the introduction of the various teams competing in events over the four days.

The parade began with the entry of the six pony club teams that had made it to the finals of the mounted games. Duo found some of them to be adorable. Youngsters, some only ten years of age on ponies ranging in height from eleven hands to fourteen hands, entered the arena and circled around. They were followed by the dressage teams; Germany, Switzerland, Ireland and Australia.

“I didn't know there was an international dressage team competition,” Duo whispered to Joe as he watched the Irish team walk past.

“Oh yes, there's also a Nations cup competition for dressage too,” Joe replied. “Although what the criteria are for qualification and competition, I couldn't tell you. I only know the basics for the show jumping one.”

“Ah.” Duo made a mental note to see if Heero knew anything about the rules and regulations covering the dressage, if it was similar to the jumping. His thoughts were brought to a halt as the
individual competitors began to enter the arena. By now the arena was starting to fill a little more and Duo hoped there weren't too many more horses to come, otherwise he couldn't see how the show jumping teams were all going to fit in there as well!

Finally the commentator announced the Nations cup show jumping teams and country by country they began to enter. South Africa was first followed by England, Germany, Sweden, Italy, France and Japan. When the New Zealand team entered there was loud applause from the audience.

“Looks like we have a lot of Kiwi supporters here,” Joe muttered. “Makes sense, the trip isn't that far for them to make.”

Duo just nodded, his eyes were fixed on the entry way, the Australian team would be coming in next.

As the noise died down a little the commentator spoke again. “The Australian team!”

Duo felt a lump in his throat, tears prickle behind his eyes and a fierce sense of pride swell in his chest as the Australian team entered the arena. The four horses walked in step, each on their best behavior as if sensing the importance of the moment. Duo felt a tear slip down his cheek when he saw Heero carrying the Australian flag.

If the noise from the crowd had been loud with the New Zealand team entry, it was positively deafening when the Australian Team began their lap of honor. People cheered, whistled and clapped. Joe nudged Duo and leaned to 'shout' in his ear.

“Makes you proud, don't it?”

“Sure does,” Duo replied as he watched Zero being the perfect gentleman. Firefox was dancing a little, the excitement of the crowd transmitting to him and he snatched at his bit. Periwinkle remained calm, Goose seemed to look around with interest and then decide he'd seen it all before and it wasn't worth wasting any energy on.

By the time the team had completed their 'lap' and came to a halt in their designated spot, the crowd had begun to settle a bit and the commentator asked for everyone to be upstanding for the national anthem.

Duo and Joe both stood and sang along with the words, each feeling their own pride at being involved in such an event, even if it was only in the capacity of a groom. Once the anthem was over, everyone sat down again and the commentator called for the President of the International Equestrian Federation to officially open the games. A short speech from the president, thanking all the competitors, volunteers and officials, the Games were declared open and the many competitors began to leave the arena.

“Come on, Duo. Let's head back outside to meet them as they leave.” Joe stood up and began to move to the exit, glancing back once to make sure Duo was following.

Once outside it took a while for Joe and Duo to make their way through the gathered crowds to where the Australian Team were standing. As they approached they noticed a few unfamiliar people surrounding Noin and the team. Duo frowned.

“Reporters,” Joe said. “This is a major event so there's bound to be press hanging around.”

While publicity was a good thing and wouldn't do Heero's career any harm, Duo also knew it meant they would have to be extra careful and discreet when it came to their relationship. While their close friends and most of the community around Salsbury where Heero and Duo lived knew they were a
couple, somehow Duo didn't think it would go down too well with the general public. It was a shame that society to the larger extent still remained bigoted towards same sex relationships. Homosexuality wasn't illegal, but there were still a lot of people around that frowned upon it and deliberately set out to make anyone's life, who appeared 'different', a living hell.

As they drew closer they could hear snatches of the interview. Noin was giving a small speech to the reporters while several photographers were taking pictures. Duo caught Heero's eye and gave the man a sympathetic smile. He knew Heero didn't like a lot of publicity, but in this case there wasn't much he could do about it and having reached this level of competition it was going to be a large part of Heero's life from here on.

Once the reporters, or 'vultures' as Joe called them, had finished, the team began to make its way back to the stables. Once arriving at their designated stable, each member dismounted and the task of unsaddling and settling horses began. Heero disappeared to get changed while Duo brushed Zero down and made sure the stallion had plenty of hay and fresh water. He also fed Zero the carrots he'd promised earlier. When everyone had finished with their respective charges, Noin appeared and gathered the group together.

"Thank you all for being perfectly behaved during the opening ceremony and press interview afterwards. There isn't any competition for any of you for the rest of the day so you are all free to do what you wish. Tomorrow I will be having a practice session in the afternoon with Heero and Alex. Treize, you're jumping in the A grade in the morning, correct?"

"Yes, Miss Noin," Treize replied.

"Zoe, you're doing the Hit and Hurry late afternoon?"

"Yes," Zoe replied. "I'm about three quarters the way down the draw so I'm guessing I should be on around four-ish."

"Right. Alex, Heero, you two will meet me here at one tomorrow afternoon for a practice session. Saturday, we will have another brief session in the morning with all four of you. I'll advise you of the time later. I'd suggest you all try to watch some of the jumping as a few of the other team members have entered different events and it will give you the chance to see how they ride, what tactics they employ and hopefully we will gain some information to our advantage. Zoe, Treize, good luck for tomorrow. Now, all of you go and have a good time, just remember the 'rules.'" Noin smiled at her team and then turned to leave, she wanted to try and 'snoop' a little on their competition while she could.

Everyone soon disbanded, disappearing in various directions and going to watch or do what interested them. Heero and Duo headed back towards the main arena to pick up an official program for the games. With programs in hand, the two wandered back into the main arena, showing their passes and being admitted to watch whatever was taking place at that point in time. It happened to be the Pony Club quadrille display and Duo watched, fascinated as the team of young riders managed to perform intricate movements to music on their varied mounts. Heero began to study the program and gave Duo a nudge.

"What is it?" Duo asked as he turned to face his partner.

Heero pointed to a page in the program. Duo immediately opened his own program and began to read. The program contained a list of all the competitors in the different events, Duo could see there was a large entry in the A grade competition Treize was in the following day; twenty-five to be exact. Treize had drawn fourteen, just over the halfway mark. Looking at the class Zoe had entered, there were only twenty competitors and Zoe was jumping sixteenth. Reading through the list though,
Duo could see there were quite a few of the opposing Nations cup teams’ competitors entered in the same events. “Should give us a pretty good idea of what to expect,” Duo said as he read down the list.

“Hai, it should,” Heero returned. “Take a look further in.”

Duo flipped over a few pages and a grin lit up his face. Each team for the Nations cup was listed along with a brief summary on each team representative's career to date. Duo scanned for the Australian team and the grin widened when he found Heero's name. He quickly read the summary and then turned his eyes to his partner. “Seems they've given you a pretty good write up,” Duo chuckled.

“Copied what I wrote on the entry form is more like it,” Heero muttered.

“They didn’t put all of what you wrote in there.”

“Probably saving that for later.” Heero really hated having to give information out on himself.

“Guess we will have to wait and see,” Duo snickered.

The quadrille demonstrations came to an end, Duo's stomach began to rumble and the pair decided to head outside and find something to eat. Locating a food vendor wasn't all that hard, there were several around the grounds and pretty soon Duo was munching happily on a hamburger with the works while Heero had opted for a fresh garden salad.

Once lunch had been dealt with, Heero decided he wanted to go back to the stables and work Zero around. He figured the stallion ought to have settled down enough in his new surroundings to accept them and he really should give the gray some exercise. If he didn't then Zero would be jumping out of his skin by the ’morrow and Heero really needed to keep the stallion focused on jumping fences and listening to his rider.

The pair saddled the gray up and then led him out of the stables and towards the area set aside for the competitors to work their horses. There was another, separate warm up area closer to the main arena but that was only for the use of those riders who were competing in an event at that current time.

Duo followed behind Heero and his horse as they rounded the back of the stable block and walked towards the open, grassed area currently used by riders to work their horses. Heero brought the gray to a halt and checked his girth. Duo stepped forward and held the reins while Heero pulled his stirrups down and did his helmet up. Slipping his left foot into the stirrup, Heero mounted and took a moment to settle into the saddle before collecting his reins.

"I'll work him over there." Heero nodded towards a vacant area to the left and then gave Zero the aid to walk. Zero obeyed and covered the ground with long strides. Duo waited until they'd gotten a little way ahead and then followed, picking out a spot under a few shady trees to sit and watch.

Zero was fresh, very fresh, and it was taking all Heero's skill to keep the stallion together and walking out. Occasionally, Zero would toss in a dancing step and shake his head. Heero kept a light contact with the stallion's mouth while continuously using his seat and legs to ride the horse together. As Zero began to relax a little and soften through his back, Heero gave the aid to trot. Zero immediately jumped forward and began to trot with huge strides.

Watching from underneath the tree, Duo couldn't help but snicker at the stallion's antics. It would appear that Zero was trying to get a little of his own back on his master for the long float trip and being confined to a stable. Zero's normal routine consisted of being stabled at night and paddocked
during the day so it was understandable that the gray would be missing his freedom a bit.

Feeling the lurching gait beneath him, Heero frowned and sat down hard in his saddle. He collected his reins and applied his legs to Zero's sides, pushing the horse together underneath him whilst restricting the forward movement a touch with his hands. Realizing he wasn't going to get away with such an unbalanced trot, Zero changed tack and began to shorten his stride until it became very choppy, the result causing Heero to bounce a little in the saddle.

Giving a soft growl, Heero applied his leg harder and gave the gray a little more rein, pushing the stallion's hindquarters underneath his body and forcing him to lengthen his stride. Zero dropped his head and gave a buck, Heero retaliated by giving Zero a hard nudge with his heels, Zero leapt forward and threw in another buck.

Heero gave the stallion a sharp smack with his whip.

Zero decided it was time to give in and stop playing games.

Duo was almost asphyxiating under the tree from laughing so hard.

Zero settled into the familiar trot rhythm and Heero lightened his contact, keeping just a bare minimum of pressure on the reins while still using his seat to drive the horse together. They circled several times, changed rein, went from collected to extended trot and then back to working trot.

Soon enough Zero was traveling well, his nose lowered, head and jaw flexed while his neck rounded and his back softened. Heero gave the stallion a pat of praise and then asked for the canter. Zero struck off into the canter with smooth, almost effortless grace, picking up the correct leading leg and allowing his master to relax into the swinging motion of the gait.

Heero repeated at the canter what he'd done at the trot, changed directions, asked for a more collected canter and then let the horse stretch out into a lengthened canter. Zero responded well, listening to his master and trying to please him. It felt good to be exercising; his muscles were beginning to get a little tight with being confined to the stable.

Once Zero was calm and working properly, Heero drew rein and let the stallion walk. He spotted Duo under the tree and turned Zero in Duo's direction. Once he'd reached his partner, Heero brought the horse to a halt.

"Looked like he was giving you a spot of bother for a while there, Heero," Duo said as he pulled a carrot from his pocket and fed it to the gray.

"Hai, he was," Heero replied and patted the gray neck. "He's settled down now though so I think I'll take him down the other end and put him over a few jumps to finish off with."

"Good idea," said Duo as he turned to see where Heero intended to go. Down the far end of the work area several practice jumps were set up, a few people working their horses over them.

Giving Zero a long rein to stretch his neck out, Heero turned the horse and began walking in the direction of the jumps.

* * *

The wind was rushing past him, the adrenaline pumping through his veins and Heero felt the surge of pure joy hit his heart as he raised himself into the forward jumping position and collected his horse. Beneath him the muscles bunched and flexed, rippling underneath the gray coat while the stallion remained in complete control. Steadying the canter, Heero turned Zero towards the first
practice fence, a simple upright. The stallion's ears pricked up as he eyed the fence, selecting his take off point and then lengthening his stride. Hindquarters drew underneath as Zero pushed himself into the air, soaring over the rails and landing cleanly on the other side. He snorted and looked eagerly for the next jump.

Heero sat down and turned the stallion towards the brush fence, shifting his body weight forward and giving with his hands as Zero lengthened out and then jumped. Three more jumps were cleared, all in the same effortless style before Heero sat down into his saddle and brought the gray to a walk, patting the sweaty neck enthusiastically.

Duo had watched the display from the fence to the side, noting Zero's eagerness and yet willingness to listen to his rider. Once more Duo's heart gave a tug in his chest, both pleased and proud of his partner. To one side he could hear another person commenting on Heero's little performance, the broken English telling him it was someone from the German team. Casually he let his eyes wander and ears open further.

"'Tis one of the Australians," the rider said to what Duo assumed to be a groom standing beside him.

"He has a good rapport with his animal. That one going to be hard to beat."

"If the rest of the team as good, then it should be a hot competition."

The rest of the conversation was lost to Duo as the pair moved away and Heero rode up.

"I think that will do him for now," said Heero as he continued to pat his horse. "What's up?" he asked, finally noticing Duo's slightly distracted air.

"Nothing," Duo replied and smiled. "Just doing a little eavesdropping."

"Huh?" Heero dismounted and ran his stirrups up while Duo loosened the girth.

Duo explained, telling Heero what he'd overheard. Heero suitably blushed.

"Maybe we will get a chance to see them working out at some stage today or tomorrow," Duo continued. "It would be good to have a little knowledge on what you're up against."

"I agree, but we can't exactly stay out here all the time just watching and waiting, someone might think we're stalkers," Heero snickered as he began to lead Zero back to the stables.

"True," Duo said with a sigh. "Maybe some of the others will have a bit of luck and catch them working their horses."

Heero shook his head. "Hard to say. Oh, there's Alex." Heero waved at the other man who was riding Firefox towards the workout area. "You going to give him some exercise?"

"Yeah, thought I'd better. He's not used to being cooped up in a stable all the time," replied Alex. "How did Zero go?"

"Zero's the same, he's used to being out in a paddock during the day. He worked well enough after he'd gotten the tickle out of his feet."

"Keep an eye out for opposing team members," Duo said and reiterated what he'd overheard.

"Will do," replied Alex. "Now, I'd better give this animal some work before he literally jumps out of his skin." Alex gave them a wave and continued on his way.
Arriving back at the stables, Duo proceeded to unsaddle and brush down Zero while Duo chatted to Treize who was getting Goose ready to take out and work. Once Goose was saddled, Heero went with Treize to see how Goose had settled as well as see how Alex was coping with an excited Firefox. Duo decided to take Zero out the stables and try to find a quiet spot where the gray could have an hour’s grazing in peace. Joe grabbed Duck and joined him.

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tbc...

Authors Note: This chapter is dedicated to a very dear friend of mine, Jodi, who lost her horse ’Charlie’ to colic resulting in a twisted bowel on Tuesday Nov 7th. Whilst Peacemillion in this fic suffered a twisted bowel and surgery was able to correct it, in Charlie’s case the twist was too severe and the sad decision to have him put down was made.

Rest In Peace, Charlie.
Chapter 55

Friday morning dawned clear and bright, the promise of a warm day ahead. Duo stretched and yawned, beside him, Heero rolled over and crinkled his nose, burrowing deeper into the pillow and snoring lightly. Duo couldn't help the soft smile that graced his face as he watched his lover sleep. Heero's face was smooth, all worry lines gone and replaced with a boyish innocence. Dark lashes lay against tanned skin, lips parted slightly as breath was drawn in and then expelled. Duo drank in the sight, enjoying the relaxed look of his lover. The bedside clock read eight, but Duo was in no hurry to get up. Joe would have fed Zero for them and Heero's coaching session with Noin wasn't until one that afternoon so they had plenty of time to indulge in a little lie in.

Treize would be competing in the A grade championships that morning, the event scheduled to start at ten thirty once the C grade championships had finished. Duo and Heero were both planning on attending and giving the ginger haired man all the support they could. There were a few of the other teams' members entered as well and Heero was looking forward to getting a proper look at what some of those riders could do.

Noin had managed to find out a little on their opposition, the South African team was still a bit of a mystery, no one seemed to know much about them at all. The Germans and the Kiwis were still the ones to beat though, the information Noin had dug up on the Germans had been quite interesting. Two of their riders were past Olympic medalists while the other two were rising stars and apparently sweeping the board on the European circuit. The Kiwis were slightly different, none of their members had been to the Olympics, but that didn't mean they should be underestimated. In a lot of ways the Kiwis were similar to the Aussies, sheer determination and will power could get them through when it appeared the odds were firmly stacked against them.

Heero shifted and blinked open sleepy blue eyes, Duo pushed his thoughts away and leaned in for a morning kiss.

"Mmm... Nice," Heero commented. "What time is it?"

"Eight-fifteen."

"Ah." Heero stretched and scratched his belly. "Suppose we should get up."

"I'd rather stay here and snuggle for a bit."

Heero gave a soft laugh and pulled his lover into his arms. Feathering kisses over Duo's neck and jaw he murmured softly, "I guess we can snuggled for a few minutes."

* * *

By the time Heero and Duo made it to the breakfast buffet most of the team had already eaten and left. Noin looked up at them as they sat down with loaded plates. "Good morning," she greeted.

"Morning," Heero replied, Duo nodded, a piece of toast stuck in his mouth.

"How is your horse settling in?" Noin asked.

"So far he's doing really well. He appears to accepted everything okay and was quite fresh when I worked him yesterday afternoon," Heero said as he poured milk over his cereal.
"That's good. We're going to need them all sharp and alert if we are to stand a chance of winning this cup. From what I've seen so far of the German team, they're pretty strong."

"What about the Kiwis?"

"Also a good team, although not quite as refined as the Germans." Noin took another sip of her coffee.

"Any ideas on the rest of the team entries?" Duo asked as he swallowed his toast.

"I haven't been able to see a lot. The French seem to be a fairly inexperienced team this time around, but a lot of their 'older' riders are retiring so this is a new lot coming through the ranks. South Africa hasn't done much, but again, they're a new team too. Japan seems to be a mixture of seasoned and less experienced riders as are the Italian and Swedish teams. The English team does have a couple of strong riders and one unknown. I'm still thinking that it will be the Germans and Kiwis we will need to watch."

"Hn," grunted Heero.

"Your team is in a similar situation, Heero," Duo pointed out. "Out of all the members, Treize and Zoe are the only ones who have competed before at international level. I know Alex is good and Zero is fast approaching his peak too, so all in all I guess you could say it's a pretty even match up."

"That it is, Doctor Maxwell," Noin stated with a smile. "If nothing else it will be a very exciting competition. I'd say it's going to come down to the team that can work best under pressure."

"Knew I should have packed the Valium," Duo quipped with a wide grin.

"Who for? The riders or the horses?" Heero was quick to retort and felt a little smug at finding such a witty comeback.

"Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of for the grooms and the chief coach!"

Heero gave his partner a 'look'.

Noin broke into laughter. "I think I'm going to need more than Valium to recover from all this. Maybe a nice, quiet nursing home would do the trick."

"Either that or a swig of the medicinal brandy," Duo snickered.

"I'd better be off. I want to walk the course with Treize before he jumps and then watch how he goes. Don't forget our coaching session later, Heero." Noin finished her coffee and stood up.

"I hadn't forgotten. We will probably see you later as we're also coming to watch," Heero replied.

Noin gave them both a wave and then departed.

* * *

Duo looked around the arena full of jumps and let go a long sigh. "I'm glad you're not jumping in this."

"Why?" The course didn't look all that intimidating to Heero. All the jumps were well within the A grade height and width and there wasn't anything he could see that would have given Zero any problems.
"Somehow I don't think Zero would be able to cope with competing in this and having to do a Nations cup event tomorrow." Duo gave his lover a smile. "And I don't think my nerves could stand it either."

Heero laughed. "In all honesty, I'm glad I didn't enter Zero for it. I think he's going to have enough to cope with as it is. Treize has had a bit more experience, and Tall Geese is also a well seasoned horse so it shouldn't affect him too much."

Duo nodded and craned his neck to see if he could see anything going on outside. His lips quirked into a grin as he spotted Joe with Duck standing to the side of the main entry. The mini pony looked out of place amongst all the bigger horses, but what he lacked in height, he more than made up for in character. Duo chuckled as he recalled their short stop by the stables to wish Treize good luck.

Treize had been preparing to mount and ride Goose down to the warm up area. He'd walked the course with Noin and planned out his tactics. Goose had already been loosened up on the flat and Treize wanted to keep the stallion moving and warm before popping him over a couple of practice fences. They had followed along, intending to leave Treize in the warm up area and find a seat inside to watch the competition. Joe had been leading Short Duck along when a rather large warmblood appeared coming from the opposite direction. The warmblood had laid back his ears and bared his teeth at Goose. Before Joe knew what was happening, Duck had barreled forward, dragging Joe with him and put his own ears back, facing off with the warmblood that threatened his 'mate'.

What happened next had been hilarious to say the least.

Confronted by a mini pony, the warmblood had taken a step back, confusion on the horse's face. Duck had snorted and pawed the ground, the warmblood gave a loud blow through his nostrils and hesitated. Duck stepped forward, ears back and a threatening look on his face. The warmblood had jumped, whirled around, turned tail and fled!

Duo had been in fits of laughter, Heero chuckling beside him. Even Treize and Joe both had smiles on their faces. Duck simply rubbed noses with his 'mate' and then puffed himself up before leading the way to the warm up area. No one messed with him!

They had found good seats inside with a view of most of the arena and jumps. The competitors had finished walking the course and the stewards were getting into place. A heavy silence fell over the spectators as the microphone hummed and the commentator's voice announced the first competitor.

The course was set with plenty of room between the fences, but the tricky part came when negotiating from fences seven to eight: the wall and following double. Both jumps were set at five foot with there being one stride in-between the two elements of the double. It soon became apparent that a rider needed to have his horse's full attention if they were to clear both elements successfully.

The first three entrants all came to grief at the double, sending poles crashing to the ground and scoring penalties. The fourth rider concentrated hard and managed to clear the wall and both elements of the double. He seemed to be stunned by the fact that he'd cleared them, promptly lost concentration and completely demolished the next two fences. Two more riders attempted the course and both ended up with faults before the seventh rider managed the first clear round of the competition.

"How do you think Treize will go?" Duo asked Heero as the eighth competitor was busy refusing the gate.

"He should go clear. Goose has jumped harder courses and Treize is a good tactician," Heero replied as the rider in the ring was eliminated.
"At the rate these other riders are wracking up the penalties, I'd say Treize has a damn good chance then. All he needs to do is go clear and he's in with a chance at finishing in the top three."

"Don't count your chickens, Duo. The better riders are yet to come," Heero stated. "There's still one of the Kiwis, a Swede, Italian and two German riders yet to go and three of them are after Treize," Heero added as he consulted his program.

Duo sighed. "Guess you're right. It ain't over until the fat lady sings, right?"

"Exactly."

Duo returned his attention to the ring and competitor number ten. His eyes narrowed and he glanced at his program to confirm that this was the first of the two German riders entered in the competition. Beside him Heero was completely absorbed in watching the man currently in the arena. With minimal knowledge on their opposition it was to Heero's advantage to get a good look at what he would be up against in the Cup.

The German rider started off slow, gradually letting his mount build up momentum while still keeping the horse focused. Even Duo could see the skill the rider possessed. By the time they reached the wall, the rider had his horse perfectly balanced and executed a beautiful turn to come into the double just right. Seconds later the pair were through the finish flags to the sound of applause and the second clear round.

"Ooo - kaaay," Duo muttered. "That's two through to the jump off."

Rider eleven didn't have much luck and left with four faults, he was followed by the Swede who also went clear. Heero studied the Swedish rider with interest, the style of riding wasn't all that much different to the German's and Heero could clearly see the experience showing through. The next rider entered the arena and appeared to be making a clear round when he hit the top rail on the last fence. The rail bounced in its cups before deciding to fall. The crowd groaned in sympathy.

Then it was Treize's turn. Goose pranced a little as he entered the arena and tossed his head as he headed for the start. Muscles bunched and flexed underneath his glowing coat, Goose was fit and eager to be off. Treize sat astride his horse, reins held lightly in his fingers, body poised and balanced, ready to give the slightest aid. He saluted the judge and turned his horse waiting for the bell. It rang and Treize was off.

Both Heero and Duo held their collective breath as Treize and Goose began the course. Jump after jump was approached and cleared, Treize allowing his horse to stretch out and gain momentum as they made their way around the various obstacles. Goose was traveling well, enjoying himself as he approached the wall. Heero's practiced eye saw Treize sit down a little and collect his horse, subtly shortening the stride and giving Goose more impulsion.

The bay sailed over the wall and was immediately turning and listening to his rider as Treize brought him around and lined him up perfectly for the double. Goose stretched out, cleared the first element, landed, took a stride and then launched himself over the second element. Landing safely on the other side, Goose changed leading legs and cantered towards the next fence, a smattering of applause following.

Duo's hands were sweaty, and as the tension built, he began to rub them along his thighs, willing Treize and his horse to a clear round. Next to him, Heero was almost riding the course with Treize, his muscles moving slightly, fingers closing and opening as the few remaining fences were cleared and Treize flashed through the finish flags to the sounds of cheers and applause as he made the fourth clear round.
"Go Treize!" Duo shouted and punched the air.

Heero let go of the breath he'd been holding and slumped back into his chair. He turned his head to see sparkling violet looking back at him.

"He's through, he made it to the jump off," Duo exclaimed.

All Heero could do for the moment was nod.

The remaining eleven riders all passed through the arena, Heero's concentration really only fixed on the remaining International competitors. The Italian rider was unlucky, something in the crowd spooked his horse and the animal went to pieces, giving his rider two refusals and being eliminated. The other German rider miscalculated the oxer and brought down the entire fence, his horse lost its footing and they were both lucky to escape a fall. The Kiwi rider went exceptionally well, his horse took a liking to the course and despite coming into each fence at what appeared to be a crawl, the horse had a tremendous jump on it and literally sprang into the air, clearing everything.

By the time the last rider had finished there were seven through to the jump off; Treize, the German, Swede and Kiwi amongst them. The stewards came out and began to adjust the course, raising some fences and placing poles across those that were not a part of the jump off course. Once the adjustments had been made, the commentator announced the jump off course and welcomed the competitors back into the arena to walk the course. Heero spotted Noin walking with Treize, the pair locked in discussion.

"How do you think they will go?" Duo asked as he watched Noin and Treize pacing out the jump off course.

"Hard to say," Heero began as he studied the jumps, his mind figuring out what line and track he would follow if had been him and Zero in the jump off. He had a good idea of what Treize would be planning, having worked for the silver medalist for some time now it wasn't hard to get to know how the man thought. "Going on what I can see from up here, I'd be betting the jump off will be won or lost on fences five, seven and eight."

Duo glanced back at the arena, the commentator had said the jump off course would consist of fences one, three, five, seven, eight, ten and eleven. Five was the oxer that looked even more intimidating to Duo since it had been raised; seven was the wall and eight the double. "How so?" Duo questioned.

"Look at how five is positioned, once you jump that you have the option of turning either left or right to come into the wall and following double. It's still going to require the horse to be completely listening to its rider for a successful jump over seven and eight, just as it did in the first round." Heero pause to see if Duo was following.

He was.

"If you turn right after the oxer, you give yourself a few more strides to bring your horse into the wall straight and have a good chance of clearing it; however, more strides means more seconds added to your time. If you turn left you can pass on the inside of jump two and be on the wall with less strides, but it's also bringing your horse in on a slight angle which could prove detrimental when you have the double immediately after."

"Ah. I think I get it. Turn right after five and add seconds to your time but be pretty much guaranteed of clearing seven and eight. Turn left and while you'll save time, you risk dropping a rail due to the horse not being straight or balanced. Correct?"
"Got it in a nutshell, Duo."

"What do you think Treize will do?"

"I'd say he'll go for the faster option. Goose is pretty quick to turn and can re-balance fast. Either way is a risk, but I'm betting Treize will go short on that one."

Duo shook his head. "If he does, I sure hope he pulls it off."

"You and me both, Duo."

* * *

Silence settled over the arena as the commentator announced the first competitor in the jump off. The bell rang and the bay horse was on its way. The rider started off fast, breaking the electronic timing beam and heading for the first fence.

"Too fast," Heero muttered. "His horse is going to lose impulsion and not have the energy it needs to finish clear."

The bay landed over the oxer, the rider choosing the short option and completely messing it up. As Heero had said, the horse didn't have enough energy left to clear the wall and sent bricks showering everywhere. The rider seemed to regain his concentration and collect his horse, narrowly missing collecting another four faults at the double. They finished the course a little slower but without further penalties.

The German rider came into the ring, saluted and then collected his horse. The bell rang and the horse passed between the timing beams heading for the first fence. "This will be a good round," Heero said as he watched intently.

Even Duo could see the difference between the German rider and the previous one. He appeared to be more at one with his horse, concentration never faltering as he steadily increased his pace around the jump off course.

Landing over the oxer, the German rider took the short option, turning his horse to the left and riding it together.

"Shit!" Heero breathed out as the horse sank low on its hocks and turned, straightened, and within four strides was clearing the wall.

"Damn fine piece of riding," Duo muttered. Experience was clearly showing through.

The double was cleared easily, the German's horse beginning to stretch out a little as they bore down on the hogs back. That was also cleared and all that remained was the fancy gate and the finish flags. The gate was taken in similar style and as soon as his horse landed, the German rider turned towards the finish, gave the horse its head and galloped through.

"Clear round in a time of 43.57 seconds," came the announcer's voice. "Herrman Schultz from Germany is our new leader."

"That's going to be hard to beat," stated Heero.

"You're telling me!" came Duo's reply.

"There's going to be some interesting riding now. The gauntlet has been thrown so let's see what the
remaining riders come up with.” Heero's tone held a touch of amusement to it.

“Geeze, I hope it isn't going to be this close in the Nations cup event,” Duo said.

Heero quirked an eyebrow.

“I'm afraid I'll need CPR if it is!”

Heero couldn't help himself - he laughed.

Silence fell again as the Swedish rider entered. The bell rang and the big chestnut was off. Determination was evident in the set of the Swede's jaw as he drove his horse's hind legs underneath and asked for all the horse had. Jump after jump was cleared, spectators eyes switching between the electronic timer and the rider in the ring; it was close. The oxer was cleared and the Swede jammed the brakes on and spun his horse around to the left. The horse tried to make the turn but was traveling a little too fast. It stumbled, regained its footing and tried to re balance for the wall.

The crowd all held their breath.

How the horse managed to clear the wall was beyond Duo's comprehension, but it did. Luckily, the chestnut had regained most of its balance by the time it reached the double and finished the course without any penalties but the stumble had cost the pair valuable seconds.

“Clear round in a time of 45.32 and now sitting in second place. The time to beat is still 43.57, can our next rider do that? Riding Tall Geese and representing Australia, Treize Khushrenada.”

The applause was deafening as Treize rode into the arena. Heero looked closely at the man who had been his mentor for so long and noted the concentration on his face, the determination in his eyes and Heero knew Treize was out to win. Silently he sent a prayer to any god listening that Treize would remain safe and Goose would give his all.

The beam broke and began counting down the seconds as Treize passed through and set his horse at the course. Goose was moving fast, but perfectly balanced, Treize keeping the power of the bay like a coiled spring beneath him. As they approached the oxer they were a fraction of a second in front of the German's time.

Heero held his breath.

Goose stood well back from the oxer and cleared it effortlessly. He landed and immediately dropped his hind quarters as Treize sat deep in his saddle and applied his legs and seat to get the horse to turn. To Duo it looked like Goose sat down and swiveled on the spot, the turn was that quick. No sooner had Goose spun, his hocks were driving back under and propelling his body forward. Three strides and they were clearing the wall.

The double followed - also clear and you could almost cut the air with a knife, the tension was so thick in the arena. As much as people wanted to cheer their 'local' hero on, they daren't say anything lest they distract either horse or rider from their task.

Goose swung sharply for the hogs back and then turned for the fancy gate. The bay was picking up speed as he sensed the finish coming up. Landing clear over the gate, Treize gave the bay his head and dug the heels in, Goose galloping flat out through the finish and halting the clock.

The crowd went wild, Treize slowed his horse and patted the sweaty neck, a grin plastered to his face. Heero released the breath he'd been holding and sucked oxygen back into his lungs. Duo was frantically trying to calm his own breathing that was bordering on hyperventilating.
The electronic clock stared back at the many faces in the arena.

43.50

“Oh fuck, I think I'm gonna pass out with the excitement,” Duo muttered.

Heero looked at his partner and grinned. “He did it, he's in the lead!”

“I really hope he can stay there too. Heero, I don't think I can watch any more, my heart can't take it. Mind if I start looking for that fat lady now?”

Heero shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“Ohhh, lookie, there's one over there. Think she'll mind if I ask her to start singing now?”

Heero broke into laughter. “Somehow I think she might take offense. I also think the remaining riders might object too. It's certainly going to be a tough time to beat.”

Duo simply grinned back. At least he'd managed to ease the tension a touch.

* * *

It was proving a tough time to beat. The Kiwi rider went next, equally as determined to give the course his best shot. He tried hard and came out clear with a time of 44.03, putting him in third place. The sixth rider was sensible and knew his own horse's limits and as such, took the longer route from the oxer to the wall. He went clear but his time was slow - 47.25. The last rider to go set off fast and maintained the pace. Landing over the oxer, he tried to spin his horse, the animal making the turn but coming in too short to the wall. The horse didn't have a hope in hell of clearing the wall and so refused. When presented at the jump the second time, the horse cleared it and finished the remainder of the jumps without any further faults.

As the last competitor left the arena so the buzz of chatter increased in volume, everyone was pretty sure Treize had won. But until it was confirmed by the judge and announced they would have to hold onto their excitement.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the winner and place getters for the open Grade A championship are as follows: First place, in a time of 43.50 seconds. Representing Australia, Treize Khushrenada on Tall Geese.”

The crowd went wild, cheering and clapping as Treize entered the arena, Goose walking with easy strides. The rest of the commentators words were drowned out by the cheering but the German rider came in second followed by the Kiwi and then the Swede. Presentations were made, Treize taking the rather large, silver cup and holding it high above his head, much to the crowds delight.

Once all the rosettes were given out, the steward took the cup from Treize and the riders did a lap of honor around the arena. Goose snorted and threw in a buck, Treize laughed and rode the horse forward.

Duo and Heero scrambled out of their seats and headed outside to congratulate Treize in person. They found Joe holding Short Duck just to the side of the main collecting area, tears shining in his eyes as he watched his 'charge' exit and immediately be swamped by well wishers and the press.

Noin managed to fight her way through and gave Treize a hand with answering the many question fired at him from the reporters. Fortunately they didn't last too long. Duo took Duck from Joe so the groom could tend to Goose, Joe taking the stallion from Treize and leaving his boss to continue his
little press interview. The girth was loosened, stirrups run up and a light rug thrown over the stallion’s sweaty body. Joe began to walk the horse around, Duo and Duck joining him while Heero waited patiently to offer his congratulations to Treize.

* * *

The rest of the afternoon passed at a furious pace for Heero and Duo. They'd both given Joe a hand with Goose and Duck, settling the pair back into their respective stables after a thorough grooming and spoiling with carrots. Goose had looked smug, accepting all the praise heaped upon him with good grace. Zero began to get a little jealous at all the attention his stable mate was getting and let his annoyance be known by banging his hoof against his stable door - loudly.

Duo had taken pity on the gray and went to make a fuss of him, feeding Zero carrots and telling the stallion all about Goose's success. Zero really didn't care, just as long as the carrots kept coming and someone was paying him a little attention.

Heero had saddled up and joined Alex for their coaching session with Noin at one. Both Zero and Firefox worked well and Noin was pleased with them. She scheduled another session for the following day, that one would be brief though with just a few jumps in it to sharpen both the horses and riders wits before the first round of cup competition that afternoon.

With Zero brushed down and back in his stable, Heero and Duo grabbed a couple of hamburgers from one of the many food vans and returned to the main arena to watch Zoe and Periwinkle in their Hit and Hurry event. Joe and Treize joined them and the four found a good place to watch.

“What exactly is a Hit and Hurry event?” Duo asked around a mouthful of hamburger. Heero only jumped in the graded events so the speed events were something totally alien to Duo.

“Put simply, Duo, you have a course set to jump and a certain time limit in which to jump it, in this case 45 seconds. In that time you have to jump as many jumps as possible and you score two points for every jump cleared and one point if you knock one down. At the end of the 45 seconds, the bell is rung and you jump one more jump. That jump doesn't score you any points but the timer officially stops when the horse's forelegs hit the ground. The winner is the rider with the most points in the fastest time.” Treize looked at the vet to see if he'd understood his explanation.

“Thanks, Treize.”

“No problem.”

“How do you think Zoe will go?” Heero asked. He knew the mare was quick on her feet, but Heero hadn't really seen Zoe and her mare jump much in competition. Zoe lived in the opposite direction to Salsbury, roughly a hundred miles away and therefore didn't compete in many of the same shows as Heero.

“She should have a good chance,” Treize replied. “That mare of hers is as clever as a cat and can turn on a dime.”

The competition started and the four were held spellbound as each competitor gave it their all. By the time Zoe entered the arena, Treize had calculated that the English rider was in the lead, closely followed by an Italian with a South African in third. He couldn't be sure though. The points he could calculate, it was the timing that was a different story. Although he was using the stop watch function on his wrist watch, his time could be out by anything up to five seconds from the judge's.

Zoe started off fast and it soon became apparent that the mare knew what she was doing. Zoe asked
for spins and turns followed by seemingly impossible jumps a few strides later. Periwinkle rose to the
class. She spun on her hocks and cleared everything her mistress put her at. It was certainly a
very exciting competition and Duo was almost turning blue trying not to yell out encouragement.

Finally the last rider went and then the longed for announcement came.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the results of the open Hit and Hurry competition...”

Four people all held their breath.

“In first place, from Italy, Luigi Den’zo. In second place, from England, Mark Broome. In third
place, from Australia, Zoe Lang...”

The four didn't wait to hear any more, they joined in with the cheers from the rest of the crowd as the
place getters entered the arena for the presentation.

As with Treize, once Zoe exited she was swamped by the press, all wanting to know how she felt
amongst other things. Duo gave Carol a sympathetic smile. He knew the groom just wanted to take
care of the mare, but until the 'interviews' were over with there wasn't much she could do. Noin
appeared and assisted Zoe in her appeasing of the press so Duo, Heero, Treize and Joe all headed
back to the stables to check on their own horses and settle them for the night ahead.

Walking into the stable block, Treize suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, Heero walking into the
back of him.

“Treize?” Heero asked as the ginger haired man remained still, his eyes fixed ahead.

Three sets of eyes followed where Treize was looking. Heero grunted, Joe smiled while Duo
snickered.

“About time you returned,” came the smooth voice. “I was beginning to wonder if I'd missed you
and you'd gone back to the hotel.”

“Zechs,” Treize murmured, his voice lit with pleasure.

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 56

Treize's face creased into a smile and he eagerly stepped forward, embracing the blonde vet in a quick hug, a hug that could be termed a welcome from one friend to another and yet held more meaning to it than that for both Treize and Zechs. Heero, Duo and Joe held back, giving the pair a moment together before they joined in with the welcome.

"Good to see you again, Zechs," Heero said as he shook hands with the tall man.

"Likewise," Zechs replied and then found himself in a quick hug from Duo.

"Glad you could make it, Zechs. Would have been good if you could have got here earlier, you missed Treize's massacring of the opposition in the A grade," Duo quipped, his eyes sparkling.

"Really?"

"It wasn't a massacre, Duo," Treize stated.

"Maybe not in the true sense, but you sure did beat the pants off them all. Showed 'em what the Aussies can do," Duo returned, his enthusiasm boundless.

Treize simply rolled his eyes.

"Is that true? You won the A grade competition?" Zechs asked turning back to his lover with wide, blue eyes.

"Errr... Yes. I did win the A grade - oomph." The rest of Treize's words were cut off as Zechs grabbed him and proceeded to squeeze the life out of him.

"That's great! Congratulations! Well done! I'd say that calls for a celebration," Zechs enthused as he let go of his partner.

Heero and Duo watched in amusement as Treize began to blush slightly with all the attention he was getting.

“When you've finished here with the horses, what say we find a nice restaurant in the town and have a celebration meal?” Zechs asked.

“That would be lovely,” Treize replied with a soft smile. It felt good to have his lover finally with him.

“And you're all invited too,” Zechs said as he turned to face Heero, Duo and Joe. “That's if you don't mind, Treize?”

“Of course I don't mind.”

“Thank you, but I'm afraid I will have to decline,” Joe said. “I'd rather not leave the horses for too long,” he added by way of explanation.

“You don't have to stay with them all the time, Joe. You are entitled to have some time off,” Treize said.
“I know, boss. But I don't feel comfortable in those fancy places and I'd rather stay here with the horses. I appreciate the invite and it's nothing personal, I just...”

“It's okay, Joe.” Treize said with a hand to the groom's shoulder. “I understand.”

Joe wished the ground would open up and swallow him, he hated being the center of attention.

“What about you two?” Treize asked as he turned to Heero and Duo.

“We'd love to come and celebrate with you. Thank you for asking,” Heero replied for the both of them.

“Good.” Zechs rubbed his hands together. “Hurry up and finish off seeing to your horses and we can get going.”

* * *

The meal was excellent. Zechs found a quaint little restaurant just off the main street in the town that was cozy and served great food. The four had enjoyed good food, wine and service and were all feeling comfortably full by the time they left to head back to the hotel.

“What time tomorrow does the cup competition start?” asked Zechs as he brushed shoulders with Treize as he stepped around the other man to get into the car.

“Four in the afternoon,” Treize replied as he settled into the car's plush interior.

“We have a practice session with Noin at ten,” Heero reminded him.

“When will you find out what team order you're jumping in?” Duo asked as he did up his seat belt and slipped his hand into Heero's.

“Probably in the morning after we've had our practice session. Noin will need to go to the officials' meeting for the draw to take place. Once she knows what order the countries are jumping in she will make her decision as to what order we will jump in for our team,” Treize stated as Zechs drove them back to the hotel.

“I wonder what number you two will be?” Duo pondered aloud.

“The individual jumping number doesn't bother me so much as the team order,” replied Heero.

“Why?” Duo turned to look at his lover, curiosity written on his face.

“It would be preferable to be jumping towards the end of the entries, that way we get a good look at the other teams and know where we stand and what we need to do to beat them.”

“Heero's right,” Treize said from the front of the car. “It's the same with a jump off. The further down in the field you are, the better your chances. You know what the time to beat is, you know if you will need to cut corners or simply take it steady and come out clear to win.”

“Ah, I get it,” replied Duo.

“I wish I did,” Zechs sighed innocently. “It's been a while since I got any at all.”

“Zechs!” Treize's horrified voice all but yelled.

In the back of the car, Heero and Duo collapsed into fits of laughter.
“But it's the truth, Treize,” Zechs continued to tease, a smile playing over his lips.

“Keep that up and you'll be waiting a lot longer for it too,” Treize snorted, his face blushing with the blatant teasing.

Zechs decided he'd better keep quiet, just in case Treize did carry through on his threat. He gave his lover a seductive smile instead.

They arrived back at the hotel and made their way inside. It was still early by most peoples' standards, a little after nine, but the four decided to call it a night and head for bed anyway. They had a busy day ahead of them tomorrow and a good night’s sleep would do them the world of good.

Treize gave Joe a quick call to see if all was well with the horses as they rode the elevator to their floor. Joe reported that everything was fine; all animals had eaten their dinners and were comfortably dozing in their stables. Stepping out of the elevator, they strode down the hall towards their respective rooms, parting company at their doors.

"See you guys in the morning," Treize said as he unlocked the door to his room.

"Bright and early," Duo replied. "Oh, and keep the noise down a little, won't you? The walls in these hotels are paper thin," he added with a snicker.

"Yes, I know. You really should take a little of your own advice there, Doctor Maxwell," Treize said with a knowing smirk. Giving wink to Heero, Treize ushered his partner into their room and shut the door, leaving a red faced, gaping Duo staring after them.

"Wha-H-How? Why that cheeky...

"Duo, close your mouth and get inside," Heero said as he tried to stop himself from laughing.

"I'll have him know we're not noisy!"

"Duo. Inside - now!" Heero all but shoved his partner inside their room before people came out to see what was going on.

Inside Treize's room the tall rider had his lover locked in a warm embrace, lips moving hungrily over the blonde's.

"Did you really mean that?" Zechs asked as they broke for air.

"Mean what?"

"That you could hear those two through the walls."

"No, but Duo doesn't have to know that," Treize swooped in for another kiss.

"You're evil, you know that?"

"Evil huh? Come here and I'll show you this evil devil's horn."

"Ohhh... Now that's what I call a big horn. Mmmm... Hot too." Moments later, Zechs found himself lying flat on his back with a very horny devil hovering over the top of him. If this was hell, he was quite happy he'd remembered to pack the sun screen.

* * *
Breakfast was a little more subdued than usual. All team members were on the quiet side, each locked in his own thoughts as the competition they had all worked so hard for was now looming on the horizon. Noin wasn't worried, she knew nerves were bound to be making their presence felt and quite frankly, if they hadn't been nervous then she would certainly be close to panic herself. Nerves were good in one way, they kept the rider alert.

Sipping on her cup of tea, Noin gazed around the subdued occupants. She smiled when she saw Zechs, Treize had told her the vet would be arriving and she'd spoken to the tall man earlier. Clearing her throat, Noin spoke to her team.

“I expect you all to be mounted and warmed up by ten. I will meet you in the practice area to the back left of the stable block. I've spoken with the committee and we have the area all to ourselves for an hour. I don't intend to do too much with you all, just some basic ground work and then pop you all over a few fences to sharpen your wits in preparation for the competition this afternoon.” Noin paused for a moment to finish her tea and then continued.

“I have to attend the draw in the stewards’ room at twelve-thirty and once we know what order the countries will be jumping in, I'll need to give them the individual number order for the team. I expect to be out of the meeting by around one and I want you all to meet me in the stable block at one-thirty. I'll let you know then what the draw is and what order you will be jumping in. Any questions?”

No one appeared to have any.

“Good. I'll see you all at ten.” Noin pushed her chair back and exited the hotel dining room.

The remainder of the group chatted quietly amongst themselves.

“I hope we draw last place,” Alex muttered.

“Be good if we did,” agreed Zoe.

“Can't see it happening. Knowing our luck we'll draw first spot,” Treize stated.

“I hate going first,” Heero said. “I prefer to have a few other riders go through and give me the chance to see how the course is riding.”

“Not much we can do about it,” Zoe said as she pushed her empty plate away.

“Just better hope for a decent draw, that's about all we can do,” Alex commented and stuffed a piece of toast into his mouth. “I'm done. You want a lift to the stables, Zoe?”

“If you don't mind, that would be good.”

“No problem. I'm heading out in about ten. Meet you in the car park.”

“We should be going too, Duo.” Heero turned to his partner.

“Right with you, Heero,” Duo replied and quickly swallowed the last of his eggs.

“You need a hand?” Zechs asked Treize as the ginger haired man placed his knife and fork together on his empty plate.

“I'm sure Joe has taken care of the majority of things, but moral support would go a long way.” Treize smiled at the blonde.

“Knew I should have brought the pompoms,” Zechs replied with a smirk.
“Ah, the frilly skirt and pompoms come later, once we're competing.” Treize decided to do a little of his own teasing.

“Cheer squad?” Heero said as he caught wind of the conversation, beside him Duo cocked his head.

“I think these two would look divine in short skirts with pompoms, don't you, Heero?” Treize said as he tried to keep a straight face.

“Just because we have long hair doesn't mean we're feminine,” growled Duo in his and Zechs' defense.

“No one said you were,” replied Treize. “In fact,” Treize ran his fingers over Zechs' groin under the table, “I'd say you're definitely male.”

Zechs shuddered at the touch and it didn't take Duo two seconds to figure out what was going on under the table.

“I don't think having them out there in short skirts would do the team much good,” Heero interrupted.

“Oh?” Three raised sets of eyebrows greeted Heero's words.

“No. They'd be too much of a distraction. I, for one, wouldn't be able to concentrate on my riding knowing Duo was cheering on the sidelines in a short skirt.” Heero kept his voice low and his mind offered a mental picture of Duo in a skirt, a skirt that was riding up.

“Good point,” Treize replied.

“I think we should leave now before we frighten the entire dining room,” Zechs murmured. “Short skirt indeed!”

* * *

Duo had Zero saddled up by the time Heero had finished putting his boots on. The gray was excited. Stamping a hoof from time to time he let his impatience be known. Zero could sense the tension in the air and knew there was something important ahead.

"Steady on, old son," Heero soothed as he checked his girth. "You'll be out there soon enough showing them all how good you can be."

"Ready?" Duo asked as he handed Heero his whip.

"Yeah," Heero replied and tried to quell the butterflies in his stomach. Leading Zero outside, Heero mounted and headed for the warm up area Noin had said to meet her in.

"I'll walk down with Zechs," Duo said as Heero halted the gray and made him wait.

"Okay then. I'll see you down there."

Treize appeared with Tall Geese and after mounting, rode off beside Heero. Zechs stood beside Duo and the pair gazed after the two riders.

"They look good on horseback, don't they?" Zechs murmured.

Duo's eyes gave an evil glint as his mind kick started. "I don't know about Treize, but Heero looks even better flat on his back."
"Duo!" Zechs turned to face his fellow vet, eyes wide and then he burst into laughter at the mischievous look on Duo's face. Zechs' eyes narrowed and an evil smirk crossed his face. "Treize is even better bare back."

Duo almost choked. "Zechs! I never would have thought something like that would come out of your mouth. Next thing you'll be telling me you need the whip and spurs..." Duo's eyes widened considerably at the look Zechs gave him. "On second thoughts - I really don't want to know."

Zechs burst out into deep laughter, the look on Duo's face had been priceless. "Come on, we'd better get going if we want to offer that moral support."

Shaking his head, Duo followed. He'd never have picked the blonde vet for one to tease like that. Behind them, Joe brought Duck out of his stable and followed along, the mini pony snatching mouthfuls of grass whenever he could.

* * *

Noin had joined the riders and was busy instructing them on the flat. All the horses had warmed up well and gotten the tickle out of their feet and were now working steadily. Noin was pleased with the team thus far, the improvement in them all since the camp was clearly evident. She felt a small amount of satisfaction knowing the group had obviously listened to their lessons during the camp and tried hard to work on their faults. There was nothing more rewarding to an instructor than to see a pupil going ahead in leaps and bounds and knowing you were the one to help them.

After a good twenty minutes on the flat, Noin gave the team a breather and adjusted the practice jumps that had been set for them. Once she was satisfied with the fences she returned to the group and explained what she wanted them to do. Firstly she wanted each of them to jump the six fences in the order she gave. Depending on how they tackled those they would either jump them again or move onto the grid she had set up. Once everyone was clear on what Noin wanted, she gave the riders a few minutes to walk the 'course'.

With the riders back in their respective saddles, Noin had Zoe start. The mare popped over the fences with ease, full of energy. Duo had expected the mare to have shown a little tiredness after yesterday's competition, but Periwinkle was as fresh as a daisy. Alex went next, Firefox clearing all the fences and eager for more. After Alex went Heero. Zero was pulling hard, he wanted to jump! It took all Heero's concentration to keep the stallion where he wanted him and make him listen. Luckily Zero grudgingly slowed his pace to what Heero wanted and cleared all the fences with inches to spare.

Treize was last to go. He circled Goose around and then put him at the first fence. Goose seemed to slow down, reluctance clearly showing in his stride. Treize worked hard to keep the bay going and only just scraped over the first jump. Zechs frowned as he watched, beside him Duo was also frowning. Goose didn't look himself at all.

Approaching the second fence, Treize could feel his mount slowing further. Treize applied his legs hard, even going so far as to give Goose a good dig with his heels and then follow up with his whip. Goose dug his toes in and refused the fence.

“Something's not right,” Heero muttered. To the side, Duo was thinking the same thing.

Treize turned Goose around and brought him at the jump again. Once more Goose dug in his hooves and refused to jump.

Zechs was getting worried; as was Noin and the rest of the team. The last thing Noin needed was for one of their best hopes to go off his jumping.
“What's the problem, Treize?” Noin shouted as she walked over to the rider and his sour looking horse.

“I'm not sure,” Treize replied honestly. “Maybe I should get Zechs or Duo to have a look at him.”

“Good idea.” Noin turned and indicated for Treize to follow. The rest of the group were all chattering amongst themselves, wondering why Goose was refusing, especially after his excellent performance the previous day.

Zechs immediately began to check Goose over, Duo standing to the side, his head cocked as his eyes ran over the bay. Shifting slightly, Duo's gaze drifted over the rest of the group, catching Heero's look that clearly said he was as stumped as everyone else. Then Duo's eyes scanned quicker and the proverbial light bulb went off in his head.

“Where's Joe and Duck?” Duo said.

“They're over...” Treize began and then stopped. He looked around the belt of trees where Joe and Duck should have been standing. “They're not there.”

“I can see that,” Duo remarked.

“No wonder Goose won't jump,” muttered Treize. “Miss Noin, I'm terribly sorry about this. I need to find Duck and then I'm sure Goose will be back to his jumping with no fuss.”

Noin laughed. “I'd forgotten about the mini influence.”

“I wonder where they are?” Duo mused. “Joe and Duck were right behind us when we left the stables. I'll go look for them.”

“Thanks, Duo,” Treize replied.

“Right. While Doctor Maxwell is locating Goose's security blanket, the rest of you can jump the course again,” Noin said and then proceeded to tell them what she wanted this time in regards to speed and turns.

Duo wandered off in the direction of the stables. It didn't take him long to find Joe and Duck. The mini pony had found himself a thick patch of grass and was busy mowing it. Joe was sitting in the grass, his boot off his foot and cradling a swollen looking ankle. “Joe? Joe, are you okay? What happened?” Duo asked as he knelt beside the groom.

“Little shit decided he wanted a green pick and completely took me by surprise. Before I could think, he'd pulled me over here. I caught my foot in a tree root trying to stop him. I think I've sprained my ankle.”

That would explain why Joe had been unable to lead Duck to the practice area, Duo thought to himself. Quickly he took a look at the ankle, fingers moving gently but expertly over the joint. “I know I'm not a human doctor, Joe, but I'd say it's certainly sprained. It needs to be strapped and supported. You stay here and I'll go back down to the stables and grab a couple of bandages from the first aid kit in Zero's locker. I won't be long.”

“Thanks, Duo.”

It didn't take Duo long to fetch what he needed and he was soon strapping the ankle. He knew better than to suggest to Joe that he stay off it and go to the local hospital or doctor's surgery for an x-ray. Joe would go later, once he knew the horses were okay. With the ankle now strapped, Joe was able
to put some weight on it and managed to hobble along. Duo grabbed Duck's lead rope and despite
the pony trying to pull back to the grass, Duo stood firm, even going so far as to growl at the animal.
Once Duo growled at him, Duck thought it best to give in, he'd had enough grass for now.
Suddenly, it dawned on Duck that his 'mate' wasn't around.

He gave a high pitched neigh.

“Come on, you mini terrorist,” Duo growled. “You've caused enough trouble for one day. By rights
I should be putting Joe on your back for you to carry seeing as how you caused his sprained ankle.”

With the mini pony on one side and Joe leaning on his other side, Duo made it back to the team.
Immediately Treize was beside them demanding to know what had happened. The rest of the team,
Noin and Zechs weren't far behind.

After both Joe and Duo had related their respective tales and Joe's bound ankle had been checked by
Noin, Treize and Zechs, Duck was reacquainted with Goose and the big bay seemed to visibly relax.
Duck was tethered to a tree and Noin recommenced her training session. Treize once more rode
Goose at the course and this time the stallion responded beautifully, sailing over everything as if he
didn't have a care in the world. The rest of the team, Noin included, wouldn't have believed it if they
hadn't seen it. Clearly the mini pony did have a strong influence over Goose.

Once the course had been completed to Noin's satisfaction, she took them to the grid and had them
ride it several times. The grid was a series of five jumps in a straight line. Usually a grid was set with
anything from no stride to two or three strides in-between each jump. This time though, Noin had
deliberately off set the strides, putting a couple of jumps with one stride and then two with one and a
half strides. By the time all four team members had completed the grid four times, the horses were
really listening to their riders. That was what Noin had been aiming for.

Now that their attention was fixed firmly on their riders, Noin knew she had a team with a good
chance. Just as long as they could all keep their focus in the arena. Deciding they'd all had enough,
she called a halt to the coaching session. Speaking with each rider individually first, she then
addressed them as a group.

“I'll leave you all now to take your horses back to the stables and cool them off. I'll be going to the
meeting shortly for the draw and to put in your jumping order. Once I'm finished with the official
part I'll return to the stables and let you know what order the countries will be jumping in and also to
inform you of what number each of you will be in the team. Thank you.”

The team began to filter off towards the stable block, Duo leading Duck and Zechs giving Joe a
hand.

* * *

Noin smiled a little as the final team was drawn. She looked at the jumping order and decided they
hadn't done too badly after all. They weren't last in the competition, but they weren't first either. All
in all, it was a pretty good draw.

The steward beckoned her over and she gave him the information he required; namely the order in
which her team would be jumping. Once the formalities were out of the way, Noin thought she'd
best head back to the stables where the team would be eagerly awaiting her and their fate.

Best not to keep them on tenterhooks too long.

Back at the stables the team members had cleaned up their horses and put them away. Treize had
insisted that Joe sit down and rest his foot, he was more than capable of unsaddling, brushing down Goose and rugging the stallion up. Zechs took care of Duck, putting the mini pony safely into his stable and making sure the door was secure. Joe grumbled, but there wasn't much he could do about it. Someone managed to find an ice pack from somewhere and Joe was instructed to spend the afternoon resting with the ice pack on his ankle for twenty minutes and then off for thirty minutes, the cycle to be repeated at least three times.

Once all the horses and Joe were taken care of, there wasn't much else to do but sit around and wait for Noin to get back. Heero sat on an upturned bucket and decided he might as well clean his saddle and bridle while waiting. It would need to be cleaned for the competition anyway so he might as well do it now. Pretty soon the rest of the team members joined him, grooms and riders alike all saddle soaping leather or polishing metal bits. They had just finished cleaning their respective sets of gear and putting saddles and bridles back together when Noin appeared.

Immediately the woman was attacked by a barrage of questions. She fended them all off, telling the team she would speak with them once they'd cleaned up and put their gear away.

"Geeze, I wish I could get my surgery cleaned up that quick," muttered Duo as he observed the speed in which the area they had been using had been tidied.

"Good," Noin said as she made herself comfortable on someone's upturned feed bucket. The rest of the group gathered around her with expectant looks on their faces. Noin smiled. Time to put them out of their misery.

"The draw has been completed and you'll be pleased to know we aren't jumping first, neither are we last. The order for the countries will be..." Noin fished in her pocket and drew out her note book. "England, Italy, Sweden, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Germany and France."

"That's not too bad," Zoe commented.

"At least we're around three-quarters the way down, that should give us a good idea of the other teams and how the course is riding," Alex stated.

"Only problem I can see is that the German team rides after us," Treize said with a frown. "They're our biggest threat."

"Could be worse," Heero began. "At least the Kiwis are before us."

"Good point," Treize returned.

"Guess you will all have to give it everything you've got then, really give the German team something to chase," Duo said with a grin.

"That, Doctor Maxwell, is something I'm looking forward to," Zoe said with a smile at the vet.

Noin watched the various faces and listened to the comments with amusement in her eyes. The team spirit was coming through; good. That was what she wanted. Once their chatter regarding the country draw had worn itself out, she cleared her throat again.

"I'm sure you all want to know what order you will be jumping in?"

The team members immediately fell silent and stared at their coach, waiting patiently for her to announce their order.

"Rider one will be Treize. Rider two; Zoe. Rider three; Heero. Rider four; Alex."
The buzz of chatter started again. Heero could quite understand why Noin had numbered them that way. It made sense to put the more experienced horses and riders first, that way they could let the less experienced know how the course was riding, what steps needed to be taken to ensure a clear round and what jumps, if any, were awkward or giving problems.

Once everyone had finished discussing the individual draw, Noin addressed them again. "The cup competition is due to start at four. I expect you all to be saddled up, warmed up and ready to go by three-thirty. The course will be open for walking then and we will all walk it together. Any questions?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"Right. Your time is your own for now. I will see you all, immaculately turned out," Noin threw a firm look at them all, "in the collecting area at three-thirty." With that, Noin left.

Heero felt the butterflies returning to his stomach and glanced at his watch. It was one now. Duo's hand on his arm drew him from his thoughts and he looked at his partner.

"Let's go grab a bite to eat and then I'll start getting Zero ready while you go get yourself all primped up."

Heero raised an eyebrow. "Primped?"

"Yeah, you know what I mean. Put all your fancy gear on, only make sure those jodhpurs aren't too revealing. I don't want people ogling what is mine." Duo added a wink for good measure.

Shaking his head, Heero followed his partner to the food vans. Primped indeed!

* * *

It was three-thirty and the Australian team all lined up ready for inspection. Noin passed over them all, checking that the gear was safe, fitting properly and clean. She smiled as she noted the edge of nervousness to them all. Even the horses seemed a bit fidgety. Standing back to appraise them as a team, she felt herself overcome with pride. Her heart swelled and a lump lodged in her throat. They all looked great and win lose or draw, she was proud of them.

The announcement came over the public address system telling the competitors that the Nations cup course was now open for walking.

"That's our cue, people. Hand your horses to your grooms, remember to have your whips, helmets, spurs and anything else you plan on carrying or wearing while jumping with you and let's go walk this course."

Heero handed Zero's reins to Duo, his legs feeling like jelly.

Sensing Heero's nervousness, Duo gave his lover a soft smile, one he kept especially for Heero. "You'll be fine, Heero. Go walk that course and then ride it with everything you have." Duo wished he could have given Heero a kiss or at least a hug.

Heero wished he could have had one too.

* * *

tbc.....
Chapter 57

Having handed Zero over to Duo to look after, Heero followed Noin and the rest of the team into the arena to walk the course. From the corner of his eye he noted the other teams with their coaches also walking the course and they all looked a lot more confident than he felt.

"They may appear to be confident and sure of themselves, but underneath they're just as nervous as you are," Treize whispered softly to Heero.

Heero turned and looked at the older rider. "They certainly don't show it," he replied.

"Ah, it's all part of the psychology."

"Huh?"

"Give everyone the outward appearance that you know exactly what you're doing, look down your nose at the opposition as if asking them the question of why are they here when they don't stand a chance. It's called psychology, Heero. By giving others the appearance that they're good and going to win has the opposition questioning themselves and their own abilities, the seed of self doubt is a very powerful thing. Ignore them, you're more than capable of jumping this course, Heero, Noin and the selectors wouldn't have picked you if they didn't have confidence in you or Zero."

Understanding what Treize meant, Heero did his best to ignore the other competitors and focus on the course. He was quickly absorbed in the jumps ahead and how best to ride the course to gain minimal penalties and give his team a good score.

"Everyone listening?" Noin asked as she faced the team. "Right, let's go then. Here are the start flags..."

Noin walked the course with the team, going over any possible problem points and answering questions that arose as they progressed around the various jumps. When they had finished, Heero and Treize went back and walked it again, Heero pacing out the strides between different jumps and working out his best angles for approach to the more difficult fences. Once he was satisfied he'd gotten the course firmly lodged in his mind as well as how he was going to ride it, he returned to Duo who was waiting patiently with Zero.

"What's it like?" Duo asked. He hadn't seen the course yet, staying outside with Zero and giving Heero a hand the more important issue at the moment. Duo would go inside and watch a little later.

"Actually, it's not too bad," Heero replied as he ran a hand absently down Zero's neck. "It's fairly straightforward from fences one to six. From six onwards it could get tricky. There's a tight left turn from fence six to seven and from eight to nine which is the triple. Once you're over nine C, ten and eleven are in a straight line with a right turn to twelve and the finish."

"Ah."

The turn from six to seven will need to be made with accuracy as seven's the parallel bars which will require your horse to be balanced and full of impulsion if he's to jump it successfully."

"And the triple?" Duo asked.
"Again it's going to come down to whether or not the horse is listening. The turn shouldn't pose much of a problem, it's getting the horse re-balanced and driving forward that will be. Nine is the triple consisting of three separate elements; A, B and C. There's two strides between A and B then one stride between B and C. That's where you're going to need the impulsion. A and B are both uprights, standing five foot each, the third element, part C is a spread, again at five foot but with a spread of five foot eight."

Duo gave a low whistle.

"My thoughts exactly," Heero said. "By the time you get to part C, your horse is going to be running out of steam if you haven't approached the first element properly and with enough impulsion."

"I'm glad you know what you're doing," Duo muttered.

"There's a water jump too."

"Eh?"

"Fence eleven, it's a water jump."

"Oh. Has Zero jumped water before?"

"Yes, he has, but it's been a while since he did. He's pretty good though, the water didn't bother him before so it shouldn't bother him now."

"I wonder how many riders will end up taking an impromptu bath?" Duo mused.

Heero laughed. "None by rights. At this level all the horses should be used to jumping water."

"What exactly is the water jump?" Duo's mind was conjuring up pictures of bath tubs, spas and the like.

"Basically it's a shallow square cut into the ground and lined with plastic to keep the water in. It's only about eighteen inches deep, but it's thirteen feet five inches wide with a low rail at the jump off point. You aim to clear it. Putting a hoof in the water counts as four penalties."

"What if you put the entire horse or rider in the water?" Duo snickered.

"Then you end up with one soggy rider, soaked horse and elimination."

"Good job you didn't pack your speedos then."

Heero opted to shake his head instead of replying.

The last of the competitors for the cup competition exited the ring, all muttering amongst themselves in regards to the course. Heero walked Zero around for a bit, trying to settle himself a little as well as his horse. Looking at the cool, outward appearance of his rivals who were also keeping their mounts on the move, Heero found it hard to believe that they could be as nervous as he was. Despite Treize's words from earlier about playing the psychology game, Heero still felt as if he had 'new comer' tattooed on his forehead.

Duo watched from his position close to the arena entry, he could see Heero walking around, leading his horse and knew his lover was battling the butterflies. He really wanted nothing more than to take Heero into his arms and kiss him senseless right now, anything to chase away the nerves. Duo almost jumped out of his skin when Treize appeared next to him.
"He's nervous," Treize said, stating the obvious.

"I know. I've never seen him this nervous before," Duo replied, biting absently at a thumbnail.

"Looks like he's not the only one," Treize mused as he watched Duo's face redden at being caught biting his nails.

"Yeah, well."

Before Duo could say anything else, Treize had walked over to Heero and spoke with the younger rider for a moment. Then Heero passed Zero's reins over to Treize with a nod and then began walking towards Duo. Duo raised an eyebrow.

"Bathroom break," Heero muttered and proceeded towards the Gents.

Duo followed. Slipping inside the mens toilets, Duo quickly grabbed Heero and shoved him into a stall, locking the door behind them. Without giving Heero a chance to say anything, Duo wrapped his arms around his lover and seized Heero's mouth in a fierce kiss. The kiss deepened, Duo putting all the love he could into it and trying to give his partner reassurance as well as confidence. When they broke apart, Duo kept his head resting against Heero's, violet fire burning deep into cobalt as he nibbled on Heero's bottom lip while speaking softly.

"You're going to go into that arena and jump your heart out, Heero. Zero is in fine form and will take care of you. You're going to ride like you've never ridden before and show these other people just how good you are. You can do it, Heero, Zero can do it and the pair of you together are going to make us proud. Jump a clear round, Heero, do it for your country, do it for me; but most of all, do it for yourself, for the love you have of the sport." Duo took Heero's lips again, in a tender kiss this time.

When they broke apart again, Heero gazed deep into Duo's eyes, seeking and finding the strength he needed there. "Thank you, Duo." He didn't say any more and neither did Duo. The vet simply gave a nod and then released his partner. With the toilets vacant, they slipped back out and rejoined the rest of the team.

Treize handed Zero back to Heero and walked over towards Zechs and Joe who held Duck and Goose between them. As he passed by Duo, he gave the vet a wink and the thumbs up sign. Duo smiled softly and mouthed 'Thank you.'

The commentator's voice broke through the chatter in the warm up and collecting areas, announcing that the judges were taking their places and the first round of the Nations Cup was about to begin. An official looking man appeared at the entry to the arena, clipboard in hand and began to scan around. Duo moved over to join Heero as the rider brought his horse over to stand by Treize. They were soon joined by Zoe, Carol, Alex, Charlie and Noin.

"That's the head steward," Noin said. "He will be the one to call you up to be ready and send you into the ring when it's time for your round. All the number ones will go first then the number twos, threes and fours." Noin stopped speaking as the head steward raised his megaphone and began to call out for the English team's first rider to present himself and the Italian team's first rider to be ready to go.

"He should do a pretty good round," Noin said as she watched the English rider trotting his horse around in a circle while waiting for the steward to give him the all clear to enter the arena. The steward gave a nod and the gate was opened, the English rider disappeared inside the arena to start his course.
The Australian team all gathered around, as close as they dared to the entrance to the arena, craning their necks to see how the English rider would fare. They couldn't see a great deal and had to rely on the commentator for the majority of what was happening. Noin slipped inside to get a better look, promising to let her team know how the course was riding. A few minutes later, the English rider was exiting the arena, applause following in his wake and a score of four penalties. Noin returned and let them know that the turn from six to seven was what had caused the problem, the English rider's horse having taken the top rail off fence seven. The Italian rider was preparing to enter the arena, Noin requested Treize and Zoe join her inside to watch at least a couple of riders go through the course before their turn came to jump.

Joe was walking much better on his bound ankle now and with Duck tied securely to one of the outside railings, well within sight and snorting distance of Goose, Joe dismissed any protest and insisted on holding Goose so Treize could watch some of the other competitors. Duo was also pressing Heero to go watch, knowing if his partner could sit and study other riders on the course it would help him with his own strategy of riding the course as well as calm his nerves a little more. Heero didn't want to go without Duo, but couldn't put up a proper argument with so many people around. In the end, Joe and Charlie solved the problem for them, Joe stating he would also hang onto Zero while Charlie kept an eye on both horses and Joe.

Zero and Goose got on well together so they wouldn't be any trouble to Joe and eventually Heero and Duo caved, leaving Zero in Joe's capable hands. They slipped inside the arena as the Italian rider was turning to face the triple. The horse was coming in a little fast but took the first element in its stride. Landing and taking two more strides it was becoming evident that the horse was running out of impulsion, the height of the jumps combined with the short amount of space in which to gather momentum clearly telling. Pushing his hindquarters underneath him, the horse pushed gamely into the air and snagged the top pole with its forelegs. Poles went crashing to the ground but the horse recovered, his rider sitting down into his saddle and bringing the animal back under control. By the time they reached jump ten, the horse had settled again but found the stretch over the water at jump eleven a little too much and had a hoof in the water. They completed the round with eight faults.

"Those are the tricky areas in the course," Noin said as the Italian rode out and the Swedish rider came in. "It's going to be very difficult to get a clear round. Your horse is really going to need to listen to you at all stages of the course, that turn from six to seven can be done, as can the one from eight to nine and still have the impulsion needed to clear the triple. Be aware of it and have your horses balanced."

Treize, Zoe and Heero all nodded. Duo watched carefully as the Swede began his course. He rode slowly, letting his horse increase speed slightly as they progressed. When they got to fence six, the Swede had his horse beautifully balanced and came perfectly into seven. He continued successfully over eight and nine and headed for ten. Clearing ten the water was next and this is where the pair came to grief. The rider didn't push his horse on enough so consequently the animal didn't have the stretch it needed to clear the water. The steward's flag went up indicating a hoof had indeed landed in the water. The horse didn't seem to like having wet feet and completely messed the wall, sending bricks showering everywhere.

"Eight faults,' the commentator said. "Next we have John Green from South Africa..." The commentator went on to give a little spiel about the current rider before falling silent as the bell rang for him to start.

The South African's round wasn't spectacular, but it wasn't bad either. Twelve penalties. As the horse and rider were half way through their round, Treize stood up and made his excuses.

"I need to get ready. The Kiwi is next and then I'm after him."
Good lucks were whispered and Treize departed. Duo was constantly shifting in his seat, unable to keep still with the tension. Heero was beginning to feel a little sick in the stomach but kept it to himself. Zoe appeared calm while Noin remained her usual, collected self. Once the South African rider exited, Noin left to speak with Treize one last time, the other three remaining in the arena to watch. They could see Treize walking Goose around, Joe still holding Zero who appeared relaxed and happy. That made Heero feel a little better.

The Kiwi rider went well, clearing the difficult jumps but snagging four faults at jump four, one of the easier ones. *Just went to show that you needed to remain focused for all the fences, not just the ones you knew were difficult,* Duo thought to himself. As the Kiwi rider left, the commentator announced Treize.

"Riding for Australia; Treize Kushrenada on Tall Geese." The commentator waited for the applause to die down a bit before continuing. "Treize started riding when he was only five, competing in local Pony Club shows before taking up show jumping. He progressed rapidly through the grades and fast established himself as one of this countries top show jumpers by the time he was twenty. Treize has represented Australia in International competition twice now, one other Nations cup and the Olympic games two years ago where he brought home the silver medal for Australia in the individual competition."

While the commentator was saying his piece, Zechs joined Heero, Duo and Zoe inside the arena. he smiled nervously at Duo who returned the smile with what he hoped was a reassuring one of his own. Having been with Heero to numerous shows he could quite appreciate the nervousness that the other vet must be going through. Regardless of how many times he watched Heero jump, Duo still felt on edge until his lover was safely through the finish flags.

The bell sounded and Treize was on his way.

The first four fences were easy to Goose, the big bay clearing them with inches to spare and beginning to enjoy himself. Heero could see the skill Treize was using to keep his horse from getting too confident and possibly making a mistake. The double was taken with the same style and the tension began to mount in the arena as Treize sat down in his saddle and brought his horse together for fences six and seven. Goose landed just right over six, turned and came in spot on for fence seven. The parallel bars were also cleared and Treize rode on towards eight and the following triple.

Zechs began to twist a lock of hair in his fingers, silently willing his partner on while praying for his safety. Duo was equally silent, hands clasped together as he forced himself to breathe, eyes locked on the tall rider and his horse as they flew over fence eight and Treize set Goose up for the triple. Heero held his breath. He'd been closely watching Treize and how the man approached each of his fences, taking mental notes and planning his own strategy out in his head. Goose came into the triple on the correct stride, ears pricked and eager to jump. They cleared part A, landed and took two strides before the bay was once again airborne. The landing wasn't as smooth as Treize would have liked but he immediately sat down and applied his legs, pushing his horse together as Goose took off for part C. The jump was wide and Goose stretched with all he had, unfortunately his hind leg just touched the back rail, causing it to rock in its cups and then fall.

Zechs let out a groan, Duo joined him while Heero grit his teeth. Treize didn't seem to let it bother him though and had his horse perfectly collected for jump ten and then the following water. Goose flew over the water and sailed over the wall, zipping between the finish flags as the arena erupted into cheers and applause.

"Four penalties for Treize Kushrenada and Tall Geese, the first of the Australian team to go," the commentator stated and then went on to introduce the next competitor.
"Damn!" Zechs said as he took a deep breath.

"It was a pretty good round," Heero commented, "He will be pleased with the result I would imagine. It's not an easy course at all and I think clear rounds are going to be few and far between."

"Ain't that the truth," muttered Duo as he watched the first of the Japanese team members send poles flying at jump five B.

"I'm going to go find him and congratulate him," Zechs said as he stood up.

"We will be out in a minute, Zechs. I want to watch the German rider first, he's next to go," Heero said.

"I'll let him know," Zechs replied and left the pair alone.

The Japanese rider finished with eight faults and then the German rider came in the arena. Heero recognized him as Herrman Schultz, the one that had come second to Treize in the A grade competition. "This will be a good round," he said to Duo as his eyes tracked the German rider.

Duo watched closely as Schultz started his course, his horse willing and attentive. Jump after jump was approached and cleared and Duo found himself partially hoping the rider would make a mistake and partially hoping they wouldn't. Jump six was taken, the horse landing and making a perfect turn onto fence seven. The parallel bars were also cleared and the pair bore down on fence eight. That was similarly cleared and then Duo watched in amazement as the German rider seemed to bring his horse back until it was almost cantering on the spot.

"He's building up the impulsion," Heero whispered.

"Ah."

With the horse almost bouncing on the spot, Herrman eased it closer. Three strides away he let the horse go, following the animal with his own body and staying in perfect balance with it. The horse seemed to explode, bounding over the first element, landing and taking the two strides before leaping over the second. Then one stride and the horse was airborne again, clearing the last part of the triple and cantering away towards fence ten.

"Well shit!" Duo exclaimed. "That horse seemed to be like a coiled spring over that triple."

"He has the education, experience and good enough hocks to be able to do it," Heero replied.

"I'm thinking you're gonna need to convince Zero he's part kangaroo to bound like that over the triple!"

Heero couldn't help it, he laughed.

"Clear round, ladies and gentlemen," the commentator announced. "Our first clear of the competition, but it's early yet, we still have the French rider to go and then the second members of each nation will begin their rounds."

Duo and Heero didn't wait to hear any more or watch the French rider, they left the arena to find Treize and offer their congratulations. Heero also wanted to find out if Treize had any information on the course he could pass on and give Heero a bit of an edge when it came to his turn to ride.

* * *
The French rider completed his course with eight faults and then it was time for the second riders from each nation to begin. Zechs and Treize had taken Goose and Duck back to the stables as they wouldn't be jumping any more that day. The second round for them would be tomorrow so there was no reason for Goose and Duck to be standing around. Joe remained behind holding onto Zero despite Duo's protests that he would take over and give Joe a break. Joe flatly refused knowing Heero wanted to watch more riders go through and with Duo beside him it would help to settle Heero. Duo gave up in the end and after wishing Zoe the best of luck, he joined Heero inside the arena again as the second Swedish rider was half way through their course.

The Swede left the arena with ten penalties, eight for knocking down rails and two time penalties. The South African rider entered and was unfortunate enough to suffer a fall. His horse came in wrong to fence seven and gamely tried to jump it. Hitting the poles upset the animal's balance and the horse jarred on landing, his rider sailing clean over his horse's shoulder and hitting the dirt. He wasn't hurt but the fall meant he was eliminated from that stage of the competition. The New Zealand rider came in the arena and proceeded at a steady pace around the course. The jumps were taken slowly and Duo was holding his breath over each one, wondering if the horse had enough energy to clear them as its belly was just about scraping the top of the poles. But clear them it did and the Kiwi came out with the second clear round of the event.

"Next rider, representing Australia; Zoe Lang riding Periwinkle. Zoe took up riding when she was ten, showing her pony in hacking classes before progressing to dressage. The sport of show jumping caught her attention when she was just fifteen and it wasn't long before she was competing successfully in A grade competition. Zoe has represented Australia in the Pacific cup, a competition held every two years between Australia and New Zealand." [1]

The crowd went quiet as Zoe turned her mare for the start.

Duo was biting his fingernails again, Heero looked a little pale as he willed Zoe and Periwinkle around the course. Zoe started off slowly and built up her impulsion as she cleared jump after jump. The double was nothing to the little mare, with ears pricked she sailed over the formidable looking obstacle and turned easily for jump six.

"Please clear it, please clear it, please clear it," Heero chanted under his breath.

Duo quirked an eyebrow but refrained from saying anything, if he had said anything it would probably have been a mirror of what Heero was chanting or something very similar.

Periwinkle skipped over the gate and turned to meet the parallel bars dead on. She cleared those with a whisk of her tail and motored towards fence eight, the rustic hedge. The mare hopped over the hedge like it wasn't there and then turned for the triple. Heero could see Zoe checking the mare, driving her hocks underneath her and trying to contain as much energy as possible. Three strides away, Zoe gave the mare her head and she bounded forward.

Duo's eyes widened at the size of the mare against the size of the triple. He felt his admiration grow for the smaller horse as she gamely tackled part A.

Periwinkle sailed into the air, cleared part A, landed and took her two strides, Zoe's legs pushing hard to keep the momentum going. They cleared part B, took a stride and were launching into the air again. Periwinkle's back hoof just tipped the top rail, it rocked for a moment before settling into the cup again. Both Duo and Heero reached a hand to their respective chests and released sighs of relief.

Turning towards fence ten, the mare could sense the finish coming up and bounced neatly over fence ten before lengthening her stride out to clear the water. Only the wall remained between Zoe, the finish and the Aussies first clear round.
"I can't watch," Duo hissed and covered his eyes.

"Neither can I," Heero muttered but forced himself to keep his eyes on Zoe.

The mare steadied a little and then launched herself into the air. All that could be heard was the soft thudding of hooves as she landed cleanly on the other side. Then the arena erupted with shouts, cheers and applause.

"Clear round for Zoe Lang of Australia!"

Heero and Duo didn't hang around to watch any more, they jumped to their feet and scrambled to get outside to congratulate Zoe and make a fuss of her mare.

Periwinkle knew she'd been good and accepted all the praise heaped on her with the dignity only a 'lady' could show. Carol was ecstatic, patting and petting the mare, feeding her sugar cubes while continuously telling her what a good girl she was. Zoe was in tears with happiness, unable to quite believe she'd gone clear. The scoreboard though proved it, a big, fat 0 sitting in the penalties box.

Noin was really pleased, overall they had just four penalties thus far and it was much better than she'd hoped for given the difficulty of the course. Once everyone had finished with their congratulations, Zoe and Carol took Periwinkle back to the stables to settle her before returning to watch the remaining competitors. While everyone had been outside with Zoe, the Japanese and German teams second riders had completed their courses with eight and four penalties respectively. Noin went back inside to watch the French rider complete his course with four faults.

Zechs and Treize returned just as Zoe was leaving and stopped to offer their congratulations. Noin came back out to announce they had a ten minute break while the ground crew raked the arena, especially the take off and landing points at each jump to keep the competition fair for all riders. With so many horses jumping, the take off points especially were getting a little cut up. The arena surface was a rich, sawdust type material and tended to get a little boggy after a while.

Noin announced that by her calculations the New Zealand, Australian and German teams were currently all sharing first place with four penalties in total. Heero didn't really need to hear that and turned a little green with the thought that he could be the one to make or break their current standing.

"You'll be fine, Heero," Duo murmured. He knew his lover well and the weight of responsibility would be heavy on his lover's mind. "Both you and Alex have yet to go and you're perfectly capable of clearing that course as well."

Heero gave his lover a soft smile. "I know. I just hope I can keep it together and not let the team down."

"You won't let them down."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you're a good rider and Zero loves to jump. He's going to go out there and do what he does best; and so are you. Now, quit with the nerves, get on that horse and show them all just what it is I love about you."

"You mean you want me to go out there and show them my sexy ass?" Heero whispered.

"You show them that and I'll be forced to take drastic action," Duo growled softly, but there was a twinkle in his eye. If Heero was teasing back it meant he was feeling more confident in himself.
“Only you, Duo. Only you.” Heero sent his partner a gentle smile, one he kept only for Duo and went to fetch his horse from Joe.

Heero rode his horse around, loosening the gray up again. Treize came over and spoke with him, giving him some advice on how best to take the triple. “It's quite tricky, you really need to have your horse together and listening to clear it. Goose ran out of steam over that last element, but you can be sure I'll have him clearing it tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Treize.”

“No problem. Go in there, forget about the crowd, in fact, forget about everything except the jumps in front of you and enjoying yourself. Win, lose or draw, Heero, it doesn't matter. It's how you play the game that does.”

Treize's words rang true and Heero nodded in acceptance. Setting his jaw, he pushed all nerves to the back of his mind and concentrated on keeping Zero moving.

The commentator called for all the number three riders to be ready and the competition was underway once more. Noin, Treize and Zechs went back inside the arena to watch, Joe stayed by the entry way to relay the results to Duo who was watching Heero keeping Zero loose and relaxed.

The steward sent the Kiwi's third rider into the arena and called for Heero to be ready. Heero brought the gray to a walk and then halt beside Duo. “What's the scores?” Heero asked as he ran a hand along Zero's neck.

Duo stroked the velvet muzzle, Zero blowing softly through his nostrils. “So far the English rider made four faults, the Italian four, the Swede eight and the South African eight. Don't know about the Kiwi yet.”

A loud groan came out of the arena on the air.

“I'd say he's just made four faults,” Duo said and then turned his attention to Zero. Pulling gently at the stallion's ears, Duo spoke softly to the horse. “You take care of my partner, Zero. Keep him safe and don't get hurt yourself either. Jump like you've never jumped before, give it everything you have, buddy, and I promise you all the carrots you can eat.” Reaching into his pocket, Duo pulled out a carrot piece and slipped it to the delighted horse.

The Kiwi rider came out of the arena patting his horse, the commentator announced eight faults and then the steward was calling for Heero to enter.

“Good luck, Heero.” Duo gave Heero's knee a squeeze. “Knock their socks off.”

“I'll do my best, Duo.” Heero gathered his reins and pushed Zero into a trot. “This is it, my son. This is what we've been practicing for so let's not make any mistakes.” He ran a hand along the hard muscle of Zero's neck and the stallion gave a soft snort and toss of his head in reply. He could see the jumps and was eager to be off, doing what he loved best - jumping.

Duo took a deep breath and watched Zero's disappearing tail, then he headed inside to watch his lover achieve his dream.

“Rider number three for the Australian team. Heero Yuy riding Zero!” Once more the arena erupted into cheers and applause. “Heero began riding in his early teens, show jumping becoming the sport he most enjoyed. He achieved moderate success for a few years with his first horse, Alliance, but it wasn't until he purchased, broke in and educated his current mount, Zero, that he broke into the big scene. This is the pairs' first appearance at International level.”
Duo found Treize and Zechs, the pair keeping a seat for him. He sat down and tried to swallow the butterflies.

“How is he?” Treize asked.

“Nervous, but not as bad as before.”

“He’ll be fine once he starts the course, you’ll see,” Treize replied kindly.

“I know just how you feel,” Zechs said as he patted Duo’s knee and gave the other vet a sympathetic smile.

“You know, I don’t think I was this nervous when I sat my final exams in vet college,’ Duo replied. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“If you are, could you do it that side? I really don’t feel like having to get the stains out of these jodhpurs,” Treize said with a grin.

Duo’s eyes widened and he gave Treize a look that clearly said ‘I don’t believe you just said that’, but it had the desired effect of calming Duo down.

Heero rode towards the judges box and saluted. Turning Zero, he pushed the horse into a canter and settled himself into his saddle. Beneath him Zero remained calm and relaxed, although the power in the stallion’s body could clearly be felt. To Heero it felt like he was sitting on a stick of dynamite; one touch would be all it would need for Zero to explode.

The bell rang, Heero pushed his hat further onto his head, collected his reins and turned Zero towards the start flags and following first jump. As the flags flashed past, Heero forgot about the crowd, forgot his nerves and let the adrenaline take over.

~ * ~

tbc...

[1] Pacific Cup: I have no idea if there is such a competition, although Aussie and NZ used to have a competition several years ago which was held alternately in Sydney and Wellington I think. (may have been Auckland) So for all intents and purposes the Pacific cup is just something from my imagination.

Note: For those who are interested you can view a pic of the Nations Cup course that the teams will be riding here: http://www.gundam-wing-diaries.150m.com/gw/Nations%20cup%20course.htm
Chapter 58

Zero passed through the start flags and rapidly bore down on the first fence; a cross bar. It wasn't high, around four foot six and Zero cleared it easily. Landing over the first jump cleanly gave Heero a touch more confidence and he steadied the stallion for the second jump. The rails flashed beneath Zero's belly and they were making a sweeping, right hand turn for the first of the testing fences, a spread.

Sitting down into his saddle, Heero used his seat to bring the stallion a little more back to hand, Zero listening and responding beautifully.

"Nice jump," Treize murmured as he watched the gray sail over the spread.

Duo didn't bother to reply, he was too busy chewing his fingernails back to his elbows.

Another right hand turn brought the pair to fence four; the off set rails. While not a difficult jump, per say, the trick to this type of fence lay in its design. The rails, as indicated by the jump’s name - off set - were exactly that. One end was higher, sloping down to the lower end and in this case, the lower end sloped towards the outside of the arena. A horse would naturally go for the lower part of a jump, it was pure instinct and thus with jump four it would gravitate towards the outer side of the jump and therein lay the tricky bit. The horse could either run out to the side of the fence and give the rider four penalties for a classified refusal, or if it jumped at the lower part, it would be off stride for coming into fence five A, the first element of the double.

It was a clever piece of designing by the course builder and would catch out a rider that wasn't concentrating. Heero knew this and made sure he had Zero's complete attention, lining up the center of the jump and riding Zero directly for it. The gray listened and took the jump dead in the middle, landing cleanly over it and coming into part A of the double on the perfect stride.

Zero gathered himself together and sprang into the air, soaring over the first part and landing neatly. Two strides later Zero was again in the air, this time clearing part B, the oxer.

"Oh crap, I don't think I can watch any more," Duo groaned as Heero made the left turn that would take him to the gate and the first of the really difficult part of the course.

"I know exactly how you feel," Zechs muttered and gave Duo what he hoped was a reassuring smile, somewhat reminiscent of Duo's earlier smile to him when Treize had been jumping.

"He's doing fine," Treize stated as his eyes never left his pupil and friend.

Zero was enjoying himself. He loved to jump and knew how to do it well. His gray ears were pricked as he approached the gate. Gathering himself together, he allowed his master to shorten his stride a fraction and then lengthen out to take the jump. Zero bounced off his hocks and into the air, flying over the gate and landing safely. He tossed his head slightly and pulled at the firm hold his master had on the reins.

"Take it easy, Zero. The hard one is yet to come," Heero muttered softly to his horse. He gave the stallion's neck a brief caress with his knuckles, pleased to feel the muscle quiver in response before gathering his horse together and sitting down deep into the saddle to make the turn to fence seven.

Hooves bit deep into the sawdust as Zero turned and then straightened. Heero had recalled how
Treize had taken a slightly wider track than most and ultimately give his horse that little bit more room to meet the parallel bars dead straight. He did the same with Zero, the stallion lining up the jump and driving himself into the air.

Treize gave a low whistle of appreciation. "Very nicely done," he commented.

Duo was too busy chewing on the end of his braid. He'd given up on the fingernails, mainly because if he bit them any further he'd draw blood.

"Duo?"

Duo turned to see Zechs looking at him, an amused smile on his face. "Yeah?"

"Keep that up and you'll get a hair ball."

"Ah." Duo removed the now soggy, tufted end from his mouth. He contemplated biting his toe nails, but then discarded that idea, he didn't think it would go down too well with his companions if he were to remove his boots and begin chewing on his big toe! He settled for fiddling with the braid instead.

Zechs shook his head and returned his attention to the arena and Heero who was now jumping fence eight.

"Good boy, Zero," Heero praised as the stallion landed over the rustic hedge. "Now for the real test. This one's a nasty one, Zero, we have to get it right."

Zero could hear the change in the tone of his master's voice and sensed the nervousness in his rider's body; it made him a little unsettled.

Sitting down into the saddle, Heero used his seat and legs to check Zero's speed, bringing the stallion back to hand and making the required turn. Ahead loomed the first fence in the triple and with each closing stride it seemed to get bigger. Taking a stronger hold on Zero's mouth and preventing the horse from moving forward too fast, Heero drove his legs against Zero's sides, pushing the stallion's hocks right underneath him, keeping the stride short but full of impulsion.

Duo could see what Heero was doing and mentally cheered. Zero did look something like a kangaroo, the way he was almost bouncing on the spot.

Easing the reins through his fingers, Heero let the stallion start to lengthen out a touch, still keeping the forward momentum, remaining as calm as he could despite the butterflies that had returned to his stomach. Three strides away Heero gave Zero the rein the stallion fought for and let him go.

Zero bounded up to the first element of the triple, gathered himself together and leapt into the air. Part A flashed beneath them and then Zero was landing. As his hind legs came back to earth, legs appeared against his sides and Zero pushed his hind quarters back underneath. He took one, then two strides and launched himself again, forelegs tucking neatly against his body as he cleared the second element. Those same forelegs came out and took the full shock of impact as Zero landed, hooves digging deep into the ground as the gray took another stride and then flew into the air again.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck," Duo chanted as he dug his fingernails into his palm, eyes riveted to his lover and horse.

Heero closed his eyes as the stallion pushed off the ground. Zero felt like he was in the air for ages before the gray finally touched ground again. Ears strained for the sound of falling poles, but there was nothing and Heero resisted the urge to look back. Gathering his mind together, Heero
concentrated on making the left hand turn that would bring them to fence ten; the other triple. This one was what was known as a 'closed triple', all three poles being together to form one fence. The lowest pole at the bottom and rising up through the middle pole to the third pole which was the highest. The fence stood at five feet two with a spread of five feet. While not a difficult jump, it wasn't easy either, especially after having just completed the previous, very taxing obstacle.

Feeling the impulsion starting to leave his horse, Heero applied his legs and took a slightly stronger contact with Zero's mouth, pushing the stallion together and containing the energy. Zero looked for the next fence, ears flicking back and forth as he listened to the signals from his master.

"Another big one, Zero," Heero muttered as he drove his legs harder against Zero's sides.

Gauging the height of the fence and picking his take off point, Zero gathered himself together, pushed his hocks under him and launched himself into the air. He didn't make quite as good a leap and felt the back pole scrape against his belly. Zero twisted his hind legs in mid air, managing to get them over the pole without knocking it from the cups.

"Fuck!" Duo swore under his breath as he watched the pole roll in its cups and Zero's twist to prevent the pole from being dislodged.

"Smart horse," Treize commented.

Duo's heart was in his mouth though as he watched Zero land.

The twist had thrown Zero's balance off a bit and as he landed his weight was taken awkwardly on his forelegs. He stumbled, going down on one knee and then heaving himself up, driving powerful hind quarters underneath and pushing his body forwards and upwards. Heero was thrown forward in his saddle, letting the reins slip through his fingers so as not to jag Zero in the mouth as the gray's head and neck came up. With Heero tipping forward as Zero's head came up, the stallion caught his master a blow to the nose, the stiff mane hairs catching Heero in the face and causing his eyes to water. Heero's arm also jarred against Zero's neck sending shooting pains through the muscles and causing Heero to grit his teeth and fight off the threatening nausea. Blood began to run from the battered nose as Heero tried to clear his vision. Pushing himself back into his saddle and taking a precious moment to swipe at his eyes, Heero realized they were not quite on track for jump eleven; the water.

Retrieving his reins, Heero managed to gather them up and ride his horse together, the pain shooting through his arm making it a little more difficult, but he managed; turning slightly he headed Zero back in the right direction.

Up in the stands, Duo was almost having kittens. His eyes were scanning both horse and rider for any visible sign of injury. His heart was in his mouth when Zero stumbled, visions of the stallion's fall at a certain agricultural show and resulting foreleg injury sprang to mind. He was slightly relieved to note when Zero recovered from the stumble there wasn't a trace of a limp; not that he would be completely satisfied until he'd examined the horse thoroughly afterwards. The distance was too far for him to see Heero's nosebleed or grimace of pain and given that his lover seemed to be getting his horse back on track, Duo had to be content to assume that all was okay.

Treize had also felt the tension rise a notch when the gray stumbled. He sighed in relief though as he watched his pupil act on reflex, recovering quickly and riding his horse together again.

Watching the horse and rider as well as the pair beside him had Zechs wondering if he would be needed to administer CPR or mouth to mouth very shortly. While he knew Treize probably wouldn't object, Heero just might have something to say if he found out Zechs had been locked at the lip with
his lover, even if it was in the capacity of resuscitation and that would probably lead to Zechs requiring medical attention himself. No, he decided. If Duo needed mouth to mouth, Zechs would call for a medic and plead ignorance.

Approaching the water jump, Heero knew they didn't quite have enough impulsion to go with the speed. He sat down a little deeper, shortened his reins as best he could and tried to slow Zero a little and put a touch more energy into those powerful hind quarters.

Zero responded, noted the small rail and expanse of water and hesitated for a second. His master's legs though were against his sides, driving him on. Zero still wasn't too sure and slackened his pace a little more than his master wanted. Seat and legs pushed hard against him and Zero decided that if his master was that determined then there really wasn't anything to be worried about. He stretched out and gathered himself together, picking his take off point and leaping over the water.

The size of the leap took Heero a little by surprise and he grabbed hold of the mane to keep himself steady, his arm protesting the movement. Water passed beneath them as Zero reached for the dry ground on the other side. Despite the full out stretch of his forelegs, Zero's hind legs didn't quite make it to dry ground and his right hind landed in the water. The steward raised his flag.

“Shit, damn, bugger and all those other swear words,” Duo muttered.

Zechs raised a pale eyebrow.

“What? You swore when Treize knocked down a rail,” Duo stated in his own defense.

“That I did, but only one word,” Zechs replied.

“Well, I'm just getting in and saving everyone else the trouble by doing it for them.”

“Children, could you please stop your bickering for a moment and watch the final jump?” Treize interrupted them.

Sheepishly the pair turned back to the arena and the wall.

Zero was tiring, Heero could feel it in the stallion's stride. The course had been a big one and testing to say the least. Thankfully they only had one jump to go and Heero was determined to clear it.

“Last one, Zero,” he said quietly to the horse. “Clear this and you will get a truck load of carrots.” Heero ran his hand along the damp neck, feeling the muscle twitch in response. Keeping the touch with Zero's mouth light, Heero rode the gray at the final fence.

Red 'bricks' loomed before them, Zero's ears went forward, his stride shortened for a couple of strides as he sized up the fence and then he bounded forward, leaping into the air and sailing over the wall with ease. They landed cleanly on the other side and Zero cantered through the finish flags to the sounds of cheering and applause. He snorted and gave a small buck. Evidently he wasn't that tired.

Watching Heero clear the wall and pass through the finish flags drew Duo to his feet and he cheered long and loud with the rest of the spectators. “Yes!” he crowed.

“Four penalties for Heero Yuy and Zero, the third team member for the Australian team,” the announcer stated.

Duo was quickly scrambling from his seat and out of the arena to congratulate his lover and feed his charge all the carrots he could eat.
Exiting, Heero found Noin waiting immediately outside for him. Slowing Zero to a walk and then halt, he patted the gray neck as he spotted Duo out the corner of his eye almost breaking his neck to get to them. The pain in his arm had eased to a dull ache so Heero tried to ignore it.

“Well done, Heero,” Noin congratulated as she patted the gray’s shoulder. “What on earth happened to your nose?” Noin fished around in her pocket and produced a wad of tissues. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Heero took the offered tissues and held them under his nose in an attempt to staunch the blood flow.

“Heero,” Duo panted as he finally made it to his lover's side - and noticed the blood. “What the hell? Are you okay? What happened?”

“Nose bleed,” Heero mumbled through the tissues. “Zero’s neck caught me in the nose when he stumbled.” Heero declined to add that he’d hurt his arm as well, for now he’d keep that information to himself.

Treize, Zechs and Zoe all arrived at that moment and were all just as shocked and worried when they saw the blood spattered rider and horse. Noin stepped in and took over now that she knew what was wrong, especially as the media were all starting to converge as well. “Heero, get off that horse and come over here and sit down. Zoe, you go find one of the medical officers, I want Heero’s nose and the rest of him checked over; just as a precaution,” she added when she saw the glare Heero was giving her from behind the tissues. “Duo, you take charge of Zero. Treize, I want you to sit with Heero until the medic gets here. I have to go see how the rest of the riders are faring and speak with Alex; I also need to deal with the press. I will be back.”

Zoe disappeared in search of the medic. Heero dismounted and allowed Treize to lead him to the side and sit him down. Noin spoke with the media, assuring them that Heero was fine and just suffering from a nosebleed and that they would get their chance to speak with him later. Duo was torn between wanting to take care of his lover and taking care of the horse. Zero gave the nice human a nudge and made Duo's mind up for him.

“Come on, Zero. Let's get you a little more comfortable,” Duo said softly as he loosened the girth and ran the stirrups up.

“Want a hand?”

Duo turned to see Zechs standing beside him.

“Everyone else seems to have something to do and I'm feeling a little redundant here,” said Zechs by way of explanation.

“Sure, a hand would be nice,” Duo replied. “I really want to check out his forelegs, he took a nasty stumble and I want to be certain he didn't do any damage to himself.”

“I'll hold him for you if you like.”

“Thanks.” Duo passed the reins over to Zechs and then crouched beside Zero's left foreleg. He ran his hands expertly over the forearm and knee, sliding gently down the cannon bone and feeling for any lumps, bumps, heat or swelling that shouldn't be there. He didn't find anything. Switching to the right foreleg, Duo repeated the examination, happy when he didn't find anything that shouldn't be there either.

“What's the verdict?” Zechs asked, his own eyes roaming over the gray's front legs.
“All seems to be fine,” Duo replied as he straightened up. Duo fished in his pocket for a moment and withdrew a handful of carrots. “Here you go, Zero. You've earned them.”

Zero wuffled in delight and made short work of the carrots.

"Any sign of the medic?" Duo asked as he patted Zero's neck.

"Can't see anyone as yet, just Treize and Heero still sitting there." Zechs used his height to allow him to scan over the crowd.

"Okay. Zechs? Could you do me a favor please?"

"Sure."

"I'm going to take Zero back to the stables, unsaddle him and make him comfortable. Would you let Heero know where I am and that I'll be back as soon as I've finished with Zero, please?"

"No problem."

"Thanks." Duo began to lead the gray back to the stables, Zero walking happily at the nice human's side and politely asking for more carrots.

* * *

Zoe managed to find a medic and brought the man to Heero. Grudgingly, Heero submitted to the check over, the medic finding nothing wrong other than the bruising to Heero's nose. Applying a cool compress to the bridge of Heero's nose the bleeding soon stopped and the medic gave Heero the all clear. Heero kept quiet about his aching arm and the medic, none the wiser, didn't examine as thoroughly as he normally would have seeing as how the 'patient' didn't complain about any other injury.

Zechs delivered Duo's message just before the medic arrived and by the time he'd finished treating Heero, Duo had returned. With the 'crisis' now over, Heero wanted nothing more than for all the fussing to stop; preferably before anyone cottoned on to the fact that he was favoring his arm just a touch. Luckily for him, Noin returned with the much anticipated information on how the remaining cup riders had fared and the attention was switched.

“The Japanese rider had eight faults, the German none and the French rider four. By my calculations that currently puts us in second place behind the German team,” Noin informed them all.

“Damn!” Heero muttered. “I should have gone clear.”

“Heero,” Noin turned to face the rider. “You did a fine round with nothing to be ashamed of. Four faults isn't a bad score at all and we still have the number four riders to go, not to mention tomorrow’s rounds. I think you should be proud of yourself and your horse. For your first time in international competition you have performed extremely well. I'm proud of you. In fact, I'm proud of you all,” Noin said as she smiled at her team. “Now, let's all go back inside and watch the last riders go, I'm sure Alex would appreciate the support.”

Everyone nodded and began to make their way back towards the arena. Heero fell into step beside Treize, Duo at his side. They spotted Alex walking Firefox around and stopped to wish him luck. Alex looked a little green to Duo, but then again, so did some of the other riders. Duo hoped Alex would settle down and not let the nerves get to him.

They found Noin and the others inside and sat with them, the commentator announcing that these were the last team riders to go and after the final round the team coaches would be called into the
briefing room to inform the judges and scoring committee which of their respective team riders score they would be dropping to leave a final team score.

The English rider entered with a determined look on his face. He saluted and started his course. Not long after he was leaving the arena to the sound of applause and the English teams' first clear round.

The Italian rider made four faults as did the Swedish rider. The last of the South Africans to go made a complete mess of the triple and came out with eight faults. The New Zealand rider looked confident and rode the course with precision but a little too slow for Heero's liking. They were clear until the last fence when the bay didn't have enough 'steam' to get over the wall and sent the bricks scattering.

"Four faults," the commentator announced. "Rider four for Australia; Alex Grant on Firefox. This is Alex's first time in international competition. He started his equestrian career with camp drafting, winning many major events before switching to show jumping. Since purchasing Firefox, Alex has risen rapidly through the ranks and is now one of Australia's top speed competitors."

The announcer went quiet as Alex saluted the judge and headed for the start. Heero held his breath and subtly rubbed his arm, Treize remained fixated on the horse and rider in the ring while Duo was seriously considering taking a vacation after all this stress! God help him if Heero did make it to the Olympic games, Duo was certain he would need a pacemaker!

Noin sat quietly watching, her eyes never leaving the chestnut and his rider. She noted the determination in the rider's body and the slight tremble of Alex's hand as he saluted the judge. Mentally she sent a prayer to whatever god was listening that Firefox and Alex would give the round their best shot. She had faith in the pair though; but it didn't hurt to have a back up.

Alex collected his horse, Noin's and Dermail's lessons at the camp coming back to him. He took a deep breath and forced all thoughts other than the course ahead from his mind. He scratched his horse on the shoulder to let the animal know this was important and then they were through the flags and heading for the first fence.

"So far so good," commented Treize as they watched Alex clear the first four fences.

"Firefox looks happy," Zoe commented as she watched the chestnut with his ears pricked eagerly approaching the double.

"Good striding," Heero muttered as Firefox cleared both elements and rebalanced for the turn to fence six.

"Now for the first real challenge," Noin said as her eyes narrowed. "That's it, take it steady, Alex," the coach muttered under her breath.

Alex had collected his horse and the gelding cleared fence six, landing and turning perfectly for fence seven. Moments later they had successfully jumped the parallel bars and heading for jump eight.

"That should give him some confidence," Zoe said. "He was worried about that turn."

"He's certainly improved," commented Treize.

"That he has," Noin replied a little absently.

Jump eight was also cleared and the pair were making their way towards the dreaded triple. Alex tried hard to ride Firefox together, bringing the gelding's hocks right underneath him and supplying
the power they would need to clear each of the three elements.

Firefox was pulling hard, he could see the jumps ahead and wanted to go. His master's hands though held him in check and the chestnut showed his displeasure by throwing in a cat leap.

“Impatient little devil,” Zechs stated in an amused tone.

Alex gave the horse his head and Firefox tore at the first element. He grunted as he leapt into the air, the jump passing cleanly beneath him. Landing, he took the two strides and launched again into the air. This time the leap took a little more out of the horse and Alex had to use his seat quickly to push the gelding's hind quarters back underneath him before jumping part C.

Firefox responded gamely, putting everything he had into the leap, the energy that propelled him forward caught Alex a little off guard and he found himself a little further out of his saddle than he would have liked. Once hooves touched down, Alex came back to his saddle a little harder than normal, Firefox not appreciating the 'thump' of his master's weight against his back. He threw in a small buck and nearly lost his footing.

"Shit!" Duo cursed under his breath.

"All he needs to do is keep it together for the last three jumps," Heero stated as his eyes never left the pair in the arena.

Alex checked his horse, steadied and then let the chestnut have his head over fence ten. Firefox cleared it and headed for the water.

"This will be the test," Noin muttered.

"I take it Firefox doesn't like water?" Treize asked.

"No, he's not keen on it. If Alex keeps him between hand and leg then there's no reason for him not to jump it. If Alex doesn't have him firmly under control, he'll try to duck out to the side." Noin had begun to bite her fingernails, much to Duo's amusement.

Alex knew what lay ahead and knowing his horse's dislike of water, he sat down hard into his saddle and rode the chestnut forward with a determined air. Firefox spotted the water and laid his ears back. Alex pushed hard with his legs, increasing the chestnut's speed. Firefox lengthened out his stride, ears still flat back and swished his tail. He didn't like water!

Feeling his horse's reluctance building, Alex made sure he had a firm contact with the gelding's mouth, sat down and used his seat, bringing his legs against the horse's side to the point where instead of giving a squeeze with his calf muscles, Alex kicked instead.

The kicks took Firefox by surprise and he bounded forward. He was almost at the water and hesitated slightly but didn't have a chance to refuse, run out or stop. His master's legs were hard on his sides, another kick and Firefox picked his take off point, deciding it would be far better to jump the hated water than have his master kick him like that again!

Hind legs propelled the chestnut forward, no height was needed, just length. Chestnut forelegs reached out, stretching for the opposite end and landing safely in the dirt. Hind legs followed and those watching in the stands gave a sigh of relief. Firefox snorted and shook his head; there was no way he was going to get his feet wet!

"One to go, boy," Alex told his horse as he made the right hand turn for the wall. Firefox swiveled an ear back to listen and then spotted the wall. They were slightly off stride coming into it.
"Oh crap," Heero said as he saw Alex try to adjust the animal's stride.

Alex realized they weren't coming in correctly and tried to shorten Firefox's stride. They would be half a stride out if they continued on their current course and that meant they either took off far too early meaning the horse would need to stretch to get the distance or get right underneath the jump and then jump it which would put more strain on the horse's hind quarters as they would be practically leaping straight up instead of in an arc.

Firefox could sense the finish and pulled hard, resisting his master's attempts to adjust his stride. They came barreling towards the wall, Firefox realizing he was on the wrong stride but unable to do anything to change it now. Putting in a really short stride, the chestnut got in close to the wall base and literally sprang straight up into the air.

"I didn't think rock climbing was part of showjumping," Duo commented as he watched the horse moving almost dead straight upward.

"Tell me when it's over," Zoe said and hid her face behind Treize.

It seemed the entire audience held their breath as the chestnut rose into the air and somehow managed to scrape over the top of the wall and still leave all the bricks there. The sound of thudding hooves reached many ears and then Firefox was through the finish flags.

"Clear round!" the commentator announced.

Once more the arena burst into cheers, Zoe thought she was going to burst into tears and Duo thought Noin was going to burst a blood vessel given the look on the coach's face.

"Come on! We have to go congratulate him!" Zoe all but yelled and grabbed Heero and Treize by the arms, hauling them to their feet. Heero winced as Zoe's tug sent a wave of pain through his arm. Duo frowned. He'd noticed the wince and filed it away in his mind to ask Heero about afterwards.

The group all scrambled from their places and outside to where Alex was sitting on his horse, a dazed expression on his face. Crowding around, they all congratulated him, praising him and his horse on a fine round. The press came forth and had their moment, Heero being drawn into the 'interview' as well as they had missed their chance with him earlier.

Charlie took his charge to one side, loosened the girth and ran the stirrups up before tossing a light rug over the horse and walking him around.

"I'm going back in to see how the rest of the teams fare," Noin announced. "I'll see you all back at the stables soon. I have to go to the stewards' room once the last rider has gone and let them know which score I'm dropping so we will have a team score for this round. I'll also be able to get a running tally on all the other teams too."

Charlie and Alex departed to settle Firefox, Zoe went with them as she wanted to check on Periwinkle, the rest of the group returned to the arena to finish watching the last of the riders compete. The Japanese rider had just finished his round and from the applause, he'd also gone clear. The commentator confirmed that a second later.

The last of the German riders entered and Duo sat enthralled as the man and his almost white horse made their way around the course. The European riders were certainly something to watch and the experience they had gained from the types of competition held on the European show jumping circuit definitely showed through. The German rider though became unstuck at fence seven, taking the top rails down and earning four faults. Duo tried not to appear too happy about that lest he give the
impression he was a bad sportsman; but inside he was cheering.

The French rider was the last to go and rode an excellent course, neat and precise, he came out with a clear round. As he left the arena so the ground crew moved in and began to alter the course for the next event that was to take place. Noin departed, heading for the stewards’ room while the rest of the team and the grooms wandered back to the stables to settle their respective mounts for the night.

* * *

Charlie led Firefox back to his stable and removed the gelding's bridle, replacing it with the halter and tying the horse up. The light rug was removed and then the saddle followed. Bending down, Charlie began the task of removing the jumping boots that the chestnut wore, unbucketing the left foreleg first, then the hind before moving to the right hand side and repeating the task. When he went to remove the right foreleg boot he paused. A few drops of blood could be seen on the concrete. Charlie's heart froze and with trembling fingers he began to unbucket the boot. Removing it completely he could see it was stained red on the inside, quickly his fingers set about probing the foreleg, trying to find the source of the blood.

He located a nasty cut just above the fetlock on the back of the cannon bone.

"Alex? I think you need to come take a look at this."

"What is it?" Alex asked as he walked over to where Charlie was crouched beside his horse.

Charlie raised his blood coated fingers for Alex to see.

"Oh fuck! What happened? How bad is it?" Alex crouched beside his groom and the pair did their best to push the hair aside and see the true extent of the damage.

"Crap. He's going to need a vet for that."

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 59

Alex looked at Charlie and then back to the wound on his horse's cannon bone. "Go get Doctor Maxwell, now!"

Charlie didn't wait to be asked twice. He straightened up and turned, taking off at a run back towards the arena where he'd last seen Duo and Heero. His eyes scanned around as he checked his speed, forcing himself to a jog as there were many horses, riders and spectators around and he didn't want to spook anyone's mount and cause an accident. He spotted Heero, Duo, Treize and Zechs walking towards the stables and quickly changed course to intercept them.

"Whoa, Charlie," Treize exclaimed as the groom tore up to them.

"Doctor Maxwell, please, come quick," Charlie panted out.

"Charlie? What's up?" Duo asked as a small ball of fear lodged in his gut. Charlie was obviously very agitated about something and Duo only hoped that something wasn't Zero.

"Firefox, he's hurt."

"Hurt?" Duo began to walk towards the stables a little faster.

"I was taking off his jumping boots and found blood. His right front cannon bone."

"Right," Duo replied. Come on, let's go see what we can do. Duo broke into a jog, trusting that the others would follow.

It didn't take them long to reach the stable block and find Alex crouching beside his horse, a bowl of water and swab in his hand as he bathed the chestnut's foreleg. Joe hovered behind unsure of what help he could be. When Joe heard the panicked voices he'd left Goose and hobbled outside to see Charlie disappearing at a run and Alex crouched beside his horse. He'd gone to see what was wrong and had fetched the water, swabs and betadine solution for Alex.

"Let's have a look, Alex," Duo said as he crouched beside the rider.

"I think it will need to be stitched," Alex said quietly as he moved to the side.

Duo gently probed the back of Firefox's cannon bone, moving the wet hair aside to get a better look at the damage. Zechs came up beside him and scanned his own eyes over the foreleg. Duo lifted the foreleg up so he could better see the wound, Zechs assisting him by holding the leg so Duo could probe better. The cut was about an inch and a half long, running down the back of the cannon bone and then veering slightly to the side. It wasn't too deep, something Duo was grateful for, but it would need stitching and Firefox would be out of the competition with the injury. Even if the horse wasn't lame, the pressure on those forelegs from jumping would cause the stitches to tear and the wound to reopen.

"How bad is it?" Heero asked from the side where he was watching his lover work.

Duo lowered the foreleg and sighed. "I'm not going to lie here. It's a nasty cut and will require stitching. I'm afraid this puts paid to any further competition for you, Alex."
"There will be other competitions," replied Alex, his voice worried. "There won't ever be another Firefox. Please, do what you can for him, Doctor Maxwell."

"I will," Duo replied and then turned to Heero and Zechs. "Heero, can you fetch my medical kit from the car, please?"

Heero nodded and left to do just that.

"Zechs? Did you by chance come down in your work car?"

"Yes, I did," Zechs replied knowing exactly where Duo was going with his questions. "The boot is fully stocked."

"Good. I only have limited supplies in my medical kit. Would you mind if I used some of your supplies? I'll reimburse you for everything I use."

"Of course you can. Would you like a hand?"

"Assistance would be appreciated. Thanks, Zechs."

"No problem. I'll go get what we will need now," Zechs turned and headed out to the car park to fetch the items Duo would need to treat the horse.

"What I want to know is how he did it," Charlie said as he patted the chestnut neck.

"Judging by the wound and the placement of it, I'd say he caught his front cannon with his hind hoof, either taking off or landing over one of the jumps," Treize suggested. "I have seen it happen before."

"That would make sense," Charlie mused.

"It's my guess that he's done it when he landed over that wall. The take off was pretty hard and because he was so close to the jump when he took off, the landing would also be harsh. I'd say as he's landed his hind hoof has come through and caught the front before Firefox had chance to move it out of the way. The force of impact would be enough to split the skin like that despite him wearing jumping boots." Treize's eyes wandered over the chestnut. "If you take a look at the jumping boot you will probably find scuff marks or something similar."

Charlie picked up the boots he'd removed from the horse and took a long look at the boot that had been on the injured foreleg. Sure enough there were scrape marks on the brown leather. "Looks like you're right," Charlie said as he passed the boot over for Treize to look at.

Heero and Zechs both returned then and Duo began to get the items he would need gathered together. Filling a syringe with local anesthetic, Duo quickly infiltrated the horse's lower leg with it and then waited for the anesthetic to take effect. Zechs had located a small pair of clippers and once the anesthetic had done its job, he quickly clipped the hair away from the wound site. Firefox stood calmly, letting the humans do their work. He felt no pain at all and had no reason to move about.

Duo began to swab the wound out, cleaning it thoroughly and trimming the ends of the wound to make stitching easier. Once he had cleaned the leg to his satisfaction, Zechs began to pass him the threaded needles, Duo stitching quietly while Charlie held the horse's leg for him. It took a little while to complete, but finally the wound was closed, a neat line of tiny stitches just visible. Duo dusted the area with penicillin powder, placed a piece of gauze over the wound and bandaged it.

"Is he up to date with his tetanus shots?" Duo asked as he prepared to give the horse a shot of
"Yes. He had his booster just six months ago," Alex replied.

"Good, we won't need to repeat the injection then. Now, he's going to be quite sore once that anesthetic wears off. The main thing we need to watch out for is swelling and infection. The dressing can be changed tomorrow and he will need a five day course of the antibiotic. I'll check the wound tomorrow and give him the shot if you like."

"Thanks, Doctor Maxwell, and you too, Doctor Merquise." Alex patted his horse.

"My pleasure," Duo returned.

"Glad to be of assistance, although I would have preferred not to if you know what I mean," Zechs said as he packed away the items.

"I guess we better tell Noin the bad news," Treize said.

"Bad news?"

Everyone turned at the sound of Noin's voice.

"You said to tell me the bad news," Noin repeated, looking directly at Treize. "What bad news would that be?"

Alex stepped forward. "I'm afraid that Firefox has injured himself and won't be able to continue to compete, Miss Noin."

"Injured? How? What happened?" Noin started to look concerned. "He will be okay though?"

"It would appear that Fox has caught his front cannon bone with his hind hoof when landing over a jump and as such, he's split the skin open," Treize said quietly.

"Oh?" Noin said.

"Yes. Doctor Merquise and I have looked at the wound and stitched it. Luckily it isn't deep and the horse will make a full recovery, but I'm afraid there won't be any more jumping for him for at least three weeks," Duo said. "I'm sorry."

"I see." Noin's brow furrowed for a moment. "I can't say I'm not disappointed, but it isn't the end of the world. Alex, I'm sorry your horse was injured, you rode a great round and I'm proud of you. It's a shame you won't be able to compete again tomorrow."

Alex nodded. "Thanks."

"However, the team can still compete seeing as the rules state that the best three scores count for the final team score. I don't have to tell the remaining three of you what that means, do I?"

Zoe, Treize and Heero all shook their heads at the coach. It would mean that all three of their scores on the 'morrow would count and it was more important than ever that they give their best and go clear if they were to stand any chance of winning. Heero felt his arm ache and quickly ignored it. He couldn't afford to have his arm playing up now, not when his team was counting on his and Zero's score.

Noin sighed. "Okay. What's happened has happened and there's nothing we can do to change it. I've been into the stewards' room and now have the current running scores. I dropped one of the four
fault rounds from our score which leaves us with a total of four penalties going into the second round. We are currently tied with the German team for first place; they also dropped one of their four faults and were left with a score of four penalties for the first round. The New Zealand and English teams are tied for third place having a total of eight penalties each and then the rest of the teams follow on from there."

Duo gave a whoop, which he managed to turn into a sort of strangled cough when he spotted Noin's look. Treize, Heero and Zoe all smiled, Zechs gave Treize a slap on the back and a huge grin.

“Tomorrow, people, will be the crunch. We need to give it our all if we are to win this cup. While I would love for you all to go clear, I know that isn't always possible. Just give it your best and I will be happy with that, whatever the result. Now, I suggest you all go back to the hotel once you've finished tending to your horses, get a good meal inside you and a good night's sleep. The course will remain the same for tomorrow, but the heights and widths will change. I will see you all at breakfast. Thank you all for a great effort today, you have all done your country proud.”

Heero felt the heat flush his cheeks with the praise and made a silent vow that tomorrow he would ride and jump like he'd never done before. As Noin departed so he turned to Duo and the pair went to settle Zero for the night.

* * *

Dinner passed smoothly, Heero eating a lot more than he normally did. All the exercise and excitement had made him hungrier than normal. Word of Firefox's 'accident' had managed to make its way through the grapevine and several riders stopped to pass on their 'condolences' and wish the rider and his horse well.

With dinner over and done with, people began to drift off, out to visit the town or to their rooms. Duo and Heero headed for their room, a shower and watching some television the main priority. Duo took his shower first, stepping out in his boxers and toweling his mane of hair.

“Shower's free,” he said to Heero who was reclining on the bed watching something on the screen. “What's on?”

“Springer,” Heero replied.

“I don't know how you can watch that crap. It's all orchestrated, you know.”

“I know, but it's fun to see them get all riled up over stupid things,” Heero snickered.

Duo rolled his eyes and then nudged his partner. “I said, shower's free. As much as I love you and Zero, I'm not particularly that keen on having the horse smell in my bed.”

Heero grunted but stood up and began to remove his shirt. As he went to push it from his shoulders, his arm sent a spasm of pain shooting through the muscles and Heero gave a soft gasp and wince.

Duo spotted it immediately. "Okay, tough guy. What's up with your arm and don't say it's nothing, I saw the wince."

Heero sighed, he knew there was no getting out of this one. "I strained it when Zero stumbled. It's not that bad, just a twinge every now and then."

"Right," Duo snorted. "And I'm the tooth fairy."

"Really? I thought you were a vet," Heero deadpanned.
"Ha, ha, ha. Very funny. Come here and let me take a look."

Duo's tone told Heero that joking wasn't a very good idea right now and he obediently moved across the room to let Duo take a look at his arm. The vet removed Heero's shirt and began gently probing around the upper arm where the pins were still in the bone. He frowned as his skilled fingers moved over the flesh. While he may be a doctor of animals, the basics were the same and he could tell if anything wasn't right.

"What's the verdict?" Heero asked as Duo finished his examination.

"I don't think there's any damage, the pins all feel in the right place. I'd say you've probably jarred them and possibly torn a little of the tissue surrounding them inside."

"You're not going to tell Noin, are you? We can't afford for me not to ride, not with Alex out of the competition. The team needs me, Duo, I have to ride." Heero stopped, realizing he was on the verge of whining.

Duo chuckled and shook his head. "No, I'm not going to tell Noin. I think I can trust you enough to know your body's limits and not ride if it would put yourself or Zero at risk. I'll take your word that you're fit enough to ride - "

Heero's face lit up.

"However..."

Heero's face fell.

"I insist that you let me strap the arm and protect it from further damage."

Heero nodded vigorously. "That's fine. You can do what you like with it just as long as I can still compete."

Duo couldn't help it, he laughed. Heero was like a little kid that had just been given the key to the candy store. "Go, take your shower and clean up. I'll strap the arm when you come out." Duo swatted his lover's backside and pushed him towards the shower.

"Thanks, Duo. I owe you one," Heero whispered as he stole a kiss.

"Mmmm. You can pay me back after your shower," Duo replied, licking his lips.

"You can bet on it." Heero disappeared into the bathroom.

Duo looked at the retreating back and grinned.

* * *

Breakfast was a mixture of emotions. Tension was thick in the air with the thought of the day's competition ahead and the weight of a nation on their shoulders. Heero had a bad case of the butterflies again and had to force himself to eat. Treize wasn't much better, Zechs giving his lover glares from time to time as the older man simply nibbled on a piece of toast. Zoe had managed to eat a bowl of cereal and was now wishing she hadn't. Alex managed to eat a little, although his lack of appetite was because he was feeling disappointed that he wouldn't be competing. Duo, as usual, cleaned his plate.

Once breakfast was finished, Noin arranged to meet them all at the stables, wanting to check on
Firefox before going to the stewards' room and notifying the proper people that Alex and Firefox
would be scratched. The second round of the cup competition was scheduled for one o'clock so they
had plenty of time to tend their horses, warm up and be prepared before the course was open for
walking and the competition began.

Arriving at the stables, Heero went straight to check on Zero, Duo pausing briefly at the gray's stable
before continuing on to Firefox's to check on his patient. Charlie had the chestnut out of the stable
and ready for Duo. Noin arrived and Duo began to remove the bandage. Zechs appeared at his side
with fresh supplies and Duo thanked him. Once the bandage was off, Noin got her first look at the
injury.

The stitches were holding firmly, the skin looking clean and pink. Duo was happy about that,
infection was always a big threat. The leg had swollen though as Duo had predicted and he
recommended Charlie hose it for a good twenty minutes to help take the swelling down a bit. Before
Charlie took the horse to do just that, Duo gave Firefox his next injection. The chestnut was a little
sore on the leg, a slight limp evident as Charlie led him away to hose off the leg.

Having seen the injury, Noin straightened and asked Duo to accompany her to the stewards' room.
For Firefox to be scratched she needed a vet's certificate to confirm that the horse was injured and
unable to compete. Duo didn't have any of his 'official' paperwork with him and neither did Zechs
and as Duo was the treating vet, Noin knew the stewards would accept a verbal confirmation from
him.

With the formalities out of the way, Noin and Duo returned to the stables and the remaining riders.

* * *

Heero cringed inwardly as he looked at the size of the triple. They were walking the course and even
though the course was the same as it was for the previous day's competition, the heights and widths
were different. The last element of the triple, nine C, now stood at maximum height and width. Five
foot two with a spread of six foot five, it was a formidable looking obstacle. Heero could tell that the
course designer was planning on the competitors having to really work to score a clear round. Idly he
wondered if there would be any at all. The water was now thirteen feet six inches, Heero recalled
Duo's words and wondered if any of them would be taking an impromptu swim.

"There's nothing to worry about," Noin said as they exited the arena. "All of you are more than
capable of jumping that course as you proved yesterday. You know how it rides, where the traps are
and how best to ride it to give your horses the maximum chance of clearing each jump. The only
difference is the height and width of some jumps. I wouldn't let that get to you though, all your
horses were clearing those jumps yesterday with inches to spare."

"Except for the one's we hit," muttered Treize under his breath.

Heero overheard the soft mutter and couldn't help but grin. Technically, Treize was right.

"Right, all of you are to remount and continue to warm your horses up. The order will be reversed
today, the number fours will be jumping first followed by the number threes, twos and ones. As we
don't have a number four, we won't be competing until it's the threes' turn. Heero, that means you
will be up first."

Swallowing hard, Heero nodded. He turned and left the group to find Duo and Zero. He spotted his
lover over to one side of the warm up area walking the gray around. Pausing for a moment he
watched the scene, a small smile gracing his lips. Duo was leading the gray around and obviously
talking to Zero as his lips were moving. Zero's head was lowered, almost level with Duo's and his
ears were flicking back and forth. It would appear that Zero was listening intently to whatever it was Duo was saying. From time to time Duo dipped into his pocket and fed Zero a carrot, the stallion taking the treats with polite ease and crunching them down. Heero wondered if Zero was seriously addicted to carrots, judging by the way Duo kept feeding them to him he was surprised the gray hadn't turned orange by now! Although that could explain why Zero bounced and hopped around at times. Would Zero suffer withdrawal symptoms if the carrots were to suddenly be removed from his diet? That thought had Heero chuckling to himself and after watching the quiet scene for another minute he headed over to the pair.

Zero was walking happily beside the nice human, the soft voice soothing and the carrots more than welcome. The tone of the human's voice let Zero know that whatever it was they were doing today was going to be important; just as long as it included the jumping Zero loved then he would give it all he had.

"You be extra careful out there today, Zero. Those jumps are a heck of a lot bigger than they were yesterday. You're gonna have to pick your feet up even more and be careful to come into each jump on the right stride. I know Heero will be doing everything he can to give you the best chance to clear those jumps, but he can't do it by himself. I don't want you stumbling again, that little slip yesterday almost gave me cardiac arrest and I'd really like to live to see my twilight years. Your master isn't completely fit either, his arm is hurt and I don't know if that's going to affect his riding or not, but please take care of him, Zero, I want you both back safely." Duo fished in his pocket for another carrot and was about to continue when Heero stepped up beside him. "Hey, Heero. What's the course look like?"

"It's okay. Going to be tough though. The jumps have all been raised, widened, or in some cases both. It's not going to be easy to come out clear."

"You'll be fine."

"Giving Zero some last minute advice?"

Duo flushed. "Not really, just chatting to him in general and asking him to look after the both of you. How's the arm?"

"It's okay." Duo had strapped the arm expertly, winding the bandage tight enough to support, but still give Heero the movement he would need. Since the bandage had been on, Heero felt a bit more confident in his own capabilities.

"You make sure you're careful. I don't want to have to be treating any more injuries," Duo said with a mock glare.

"I promise, mother."

"Any more of that and I'll be forced to put you over my knee and smack you," Duo retorted.

"Really?" Heero teased with a raise of his eyebrow. "Ohhh, goody."

Duo's jaw almost hit the floor. "Idiot," he muttered when he realized that Heero was just baiting him.

Heero snickered.

"Come on, get on this animal and finish warming him up, you'll be required to jump soon and you don't want to be going in there with Zero not ready."
"Yes, mom," Heero continued to tease. The light banter was helping him to relax and so he continued with it as he checked his girth and lowered his stirrups.

Duo stepped forward and lowered his voice, chin resting on Heero's shoulder as he spoke. "Once this competition is over, your ass is mine. I'll teach you to tease me."

Heero shivered. "Then I'd better get mounted and get this competition over with if that's going to be my reward."

Shaking his head, Duo held the gray while Heero mounted and adjusted his stirrups. "Good luck, Heero. Go out there and knock their socks off. Go clear and I promise you a night to remember."

Duo's voice was low and husky, his eyes letting Heero know Duo was intent on keeping his promise.

"I'll do my best, Duo. Once this is over, I want you to take me to bed and make love to me all night long."

Duo's throat constricted and he lowered his eyes for a moment before opening them and looking directly into his lover's deep blue depths. "Just remember my words, Heero."

With a loving smile, Heero took up his reins and nudged Zero into a walk, Duo watched him ride off and sent a silent prayer that they would both be okay.

"Nervous?"

Duo jumped at the sound of the voice and whirled around to see Zechs standing beside him. He sighed. "Yeah. I'm nervous for him. I really hope they come out of this clear and in one piece."

"I know exactly what you mean," Zechs returned. "I'm worried for Treize too."

Suddenly Duo laughed. "Look at us, a pair of grown men reduced to shaking, worried boys! Of course they will be fine, they're both seasoned professionals and used to competition."

Snickering softly, Zechs had to agree. "We're acting like weak housewives, scared that the man of the house is going to get injured and not be able to provide for us."

Duo snorted. "I'll have you know, Zechs Merquise, I am no housewife and I don't need to be taken care of. I'm all male and you're just gonna have to take my word for that as I don't intend to prove it!"

Laughing, Zechs shook his head. "I don't want confirmation, thanks."

The pair stood and watched their respective partners and horses as they warmed up, Carol joined them a few minutes later and the three shared their respective worries over their charges and riders.

The public address system crackled into life and the commentator announced that the second round of the Nations cup would begin in five minutes. The head steward began to call for the number four riders to be prepared and ready to go, starting with the English team. Charlie and Alex showed up to wish the team good luck and offer moral support. With the round about to commence, Joe took over Tall Geese and Charlie offered to walk Zero around so both Heero and Duo could go inside and watch the number four team members all jump. They would also get the chance to see how the new heights and widths were affecting the riding of the course.

Treize, Zechs, Heero, Duo, Alex, Zoe and Noin all headed inside the arena and found seats where they could watch the second round of competition. The fourth rider from the English team entered and rode towards the judges, saluting and waiting for the bell to ring so he could start.
"He went clear in the first round," Noin said. "Let's see how he copes this time. Don't write the English team off yet, they're tied in third place with New Zealand right now and they're bound to give it everything they have."

Heero heeded the words and watched the English rider carefully. He noted how the man kept his horse more 'in tune' this time, keeping the impulsion in his horse at all times. The look of concentration on his face was evident and the arena remained silent save for the sounds of thudding hooves and the odd grunt from the horse.

Jump after jump was cleared, the extra height not making a lot of difference to the Englishman's horse. Moments later they exited to deafening applause with a clear round.

"Goes to show you that it can be done," Noin said to her team.

The team remained silent, each locked in his or her own thoughts.

The Italian rider was next and he completed the course with four faults. The Swedish rider also knocked down a rail and gained four penalties, the South African didn't have any luck, completely demolishing parts B and C of the triple and scoring eight penalties. The New Zealand rider put up a good show and came out with four faults and they were from one of the easier fences. As Alex was no longer competing, the Japanese rider went next and completely astonished himself by completing the course without any penalties to give him two successive clear rounds.

The German rider was next and Heero could tell by the set of his jaw he was out to go clear and improve on his first round score of four faults. Riding with precision, keeping his horse balanced and full of impulsion he succeeded and exited with a clear round. The French rider was the last of the fours to go and gained four faults when his horse left a foot in the water, the long stretch being just that little bit too much for the animal.

"That concludes the rounds from the number four riders from each nation, ladies and gentlemen. We will now take a few minutes recess to rake the course and then we will continue with the number three riders," the commentator informed everyone.

"It's still anyone's competition," Noin stated as they stood up and exited to see how the grooms and horses were. "The Germans are an excellent team and it will be hard to beat them, the English are also making a last minute stand and I wouldn't discount the New Zealanders either."

Heero frowned and felt the nerves tying his stomach in knots. He had to do well, the team was counting on him and Zero.

Understanding the pressure Hero must be feeling, Noin took the young man aside for a brief word.

"Heero, don't get too worked up over this. All I want from you is for you to go out there and give it your best shot. Zero is a good horse and can jump this course easily, keep your mind focused on the course, have your horse balanced and full of impulsion especially as you come into the triple. But, most of all, Heero, enjoy yourself." Noin gave the worried rider a smile and patted his shoulder. "You're a fine rider with a lot of talent. You'll go far, young man."

Heero felt his cheeks color with the praise and muttered a soft thank you to the coach. The steward began to call for all the number three riders to be ready and Heero took his reins from Duo, tightening Zero's girth and preparing to mount. The rest of the team came over and wished Heero all the best, Zoe even stopping to give him a kiss to the cheek for good luck, much to Heero's horror and Duo's amusement.
With everyone else moving back inside the arena to watch, Heero found himself alone with Duo.

"Be careful, Heero," Duo said softly as he held Zero's reins ready for Heero to mount.

"I will be," Heero replied and ducked behind Zero's shoulder, checking that no one could see and stole a quick kiss.

"I love you," Duo mouthed as Heero swung himself into the saddle.

"Love you too," Heero returned as he slipped his feet into the stirrups and gathered up his reins.

"Good luck and just do your best."

"I plan on going clear," Heero replied and with a cheeky grin he added, "You promised me a night to remember if I do."

Duo laughed. "You can count on it, Heero." Reaching into his pocket he found a carrot and fed it to the stallion. Pulling the horse's ears gently he whispered to Zero. "Take care of yourself and your master, Zero. Jump as if you have wings and clear everything in your path."

Zero wuffled and nudged the nice human. He could feel the tension in the air, sense it in the way his master sat upon his back and the slight tremble that came down the reins from his master's hands. This was important and Zero puffed himself up as his master guided him away to loosen up a bit. He would show them all just how good he could jump!

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 60

Heero rode his horse around, making sure the gray was soft, supple and listening to his aids. As he rode his mind flicked back over the years, from when he’d first gotten Zero as a colt, breaking him in and teaching him to jump. They had come a long way since then and Heero was both proud and awed by the success they had achieved. His dream of riding for his country was coming true, representing his nation in this competition the stepping stone he needed to gain his ultimate goal.

Riding in the Olympics.

Fate had been kind to him, Heero decided and thanked whatever powers that be he’d decided to enter the open jumping competition at an agricultural show in a small town called Salsbury. For if he hadn’t, his life would most certainly have turned out very differently.

He had all he could want: a successful career, good horse and another at home in the stable that showed promise; but above all he’d found happiness and a lover in the form of a violet eyed vet.

But Duo was more than a partner, friend or lover. He was Heero's heart and soul, his very reason for living. The way Duo always supported him, gave freely of his time, regardless of his own needs or wants, only cemented Heero's love and dedication to his soul mate.

Without Duo, Heero had no purpose in life.

Duo had backed him and encouraged him to try for his dream and now he was close to achieving that dream and he had Duo's unwavering dedication to thank for it. He intended to show his lover that his faith wasn't unfounded.

He would go out there and ride like he'd never ridden before. He would clear every jump and really make Duo proud of him.

Determination shone in blue eyes, nerves were pushed aside as Heero set his mind to the task ahead.

Zero felt the change in his master, the way his master sat firmer in the saddle, confidence passing through the reins and transmitting to Zero in the silent way that only horses could understand. Tossing his head, Zero let his master know he was ready for whatever his master wanted of him.

* * *

It was going to be a close competition. The third rider from the English team entered the arena, saluted the judge and commenced his course. In the seats surrounding the arena the spectators watched in silence as the horse and rider negotiated the course. Noin fidgeted slightly in her seat, knowing that a lot depended on how well the other teams went.

The English rider went clear.

Duo watched carefully, even to his inexperienced eye he could tell that the height wasn't affecting the competitors all that much. It would seem that they had all learned valuable lessons from their first rounds and were out to improve on them.

The Italian rider entered the arena next and skillfully attacked the course. He'd scored four faults in the first round and had learned from his mistakes. He also went clear.
Treize sighed and muttered under his breath, “This is going to go right down to the wire.”

“I agree,” Noin muttered back as the Swedish rider entered for his second round.

“Seems everyone wants that cup,” Duo remarked as the Swede went clear.

“What do you think our chances are?” Zechs questioned.

“Our chances are just as good as everyone else's, providing the riders all remain focused,” Noin said. “They've all jumped this course before and there's no reason why they can't do just as well as the rest of the teams are.”

Duo's stomach was churning with nerves, he could only imagine how Heero must be feeling. Carrying the hopes of a nation upon your shoulders couldn't be an easy thing to do.

The South African rider entered next and despite his horse's best efforts, they knocked down part C of the triple.

“Four faults,” the commentator announced.

Duo thought the commentator sounded a little pleased about that.

The New Zealand rider came in and silence descended once again. They started out well but came to grief at fence seven, poles scattering everywhere and the rider only just managing to stay in his saddle. They recovered and went on to finish the course without further faults.

“Representing Australia, Heero Yuy and Zero.”

The crowd gave a roar as Heero rode into the arena, the first of the Aussies to ride with Alex having been withdrawn. Duo felt his chest swell with pride as he watched his lover enter and noted Heero's calm appearance.

* * *

The steward motioned for the New Zealand rider to enter the arena and called for Heero to be on stand by. Heero brought the stallion to a walk and ran a hand along the soft, gray neck. He kept his horse walking around, not allowing Zero to cool off too much, like any athlete, a horse needed to have warm muscles to tackle the job ahead.

Heero listened as the commentator announce four faults for the Kiwi and then the steward was calling him forth. Collecting Zero up, Heero turned for the arena entry, speaking softly to the stallion. "This is it, Zero. This is the one that really counts. We have to go clear, the country is depending on us so I want you to jump like you've never jumped before."

Zero snorted and threw in a couple of dancing steps. He was ready, just let him at those jumps and he'd show them all what he was made of!

The roar of the crowd greeted their ears as Heero rode into the arena. Zero felt the tension in the atmosphere, heard the noise of the crowd and danced on his toes. He loved to be the center of attention!

“Easy, boy,” Heero muttered. “Save your energy for the fences, they're a bit bigger than last time.”

Zero popped in a small buck, he was keen to be off and jumping.

Heero let the crowd fade into the background, saluting the judge and focusing completely on the
course ahead of him. The bell rang and he turned Zero for the first fence.

Watching his lover salute the judge then collect Zero up, Duo subconsciously crossed himself and sent a silent prayer that his lover and horse would remain safe. The bell rang and Heero began his course. The calm look on the man's face hid what Duo could see beneath the surface from Heero's body language. His lover was determined, his natural grace and way of riding coming to the fore as he seemed to melt into his horse and become one with Zero.

The cross bar was cleared with ease, Zero giving a whisk of his tail and a grunt of contempt as if to say; 'Is this the best you can give me by way of a jump?'

"Steady, Zero. The big ones are yet to come and you're going to need everything you have to clear them this time."

Jumps two and three followed, Zero clearing them with inches to spare. Fence four, the off set rails, posed no problem. Zero shortening his stride and listening to his master. The double lay ahead, glistening poles that seemed to rise out of the very sawdust.

Heero sat down in his saddle, shortened his reins a little and drove Zero together. They flew over the first part, landed and then tackled the second part. Zero landed safely and cantered on, ears pricked and looking for the next fence.

"Relax a little," Zechs said to Duo who was sitting ramrod straight in his seat, hands fidgeting in his lap and trying not to grab his braid and chew on it.

"Easy for you to say, it's not your partner out there," hissed Duo.

"No, it's not. My partner will be out there soon enough, but that is my friend out there," Zechs replied.

"Yeah, I know. Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. Here, you can chew on my hair if you like."

Duo slowly turned his head and gave the other vet a disbelieving look.

"It's clean and I don't have nits." Zechs' face was pure innocence.

Duo bit his lip trying not to laugh out loud. "Thanks, but no thanks." The teasing had been what he needed and he turned his attention back to Heero who was approaching fence six, muscles a little less rigid, although his hands had found the braid and fingers were busy pulling at the tufted end.

Zero steadied himself for the gate, knowing this one was a little tougher than the rest. His memory reminded him that there was a sharp turn coming up and Zero was careful to listen to his master's instructions.

Riding calmly, Heero kept the contact light with Zero's mouth, using just enough seat and leg to keep a steady impulsion as he lined up fence six. Beneath him he could feel Zero gathering himself together, stride shortening a fraction before the stallion's hind legs came under and propelled the body into the air. They sailed over the gate and landed safely, Heero sitting deep into his saddle and giving Zero the aids to turn. The stallion responded beautifully, sinking his weight down onto his hocks whilst remaining balanced through the turn. They came in to fence seven on the exact stride.

"Perfectly done," Noin stated softly, a wide smile on her lips.
Duo was only half listening, his heart was hammering in his chest as he watched the horse and rider clear fence seven and canter on for jump eight. The dreaded triple was still to come and despite Zero having cleared it once already, Duo couldn't help but worry that the extra height and width could be the gray's downfall. "Think kangaroo, think kangaroo," Duo recited to himself under his breath.

Zero was really enjoying himself now. The jumps were well within his capabilities, the adjustments not affecting him at all. He was jumping for the sheer joy of it, loving every moment and eager for more. The rustic hedge appeared before them and Zero popped over it neatly, pulling hard as he felt his master take a firm hold.

Knowing the triple was next, Heero checked his horse, driving the hocks right underneath Zero and retaining as much energy as possible.


"Easy, Heero. Drive him right into his bridle, keep the impulsion," Noin muttered to herself.

"Good, keep the impulsion, wait, steady, hold it... Now! Let it go, now, Heero," Treize whispered.

Zero was almost cantering on the spot, the power in his hind legs building as they approached the first element of the triple. He could see the jumps ahead and fought for his head, his master's strong hands and seat holding him at bay.

"Steady, steady, a couple more strides," Heero said softly to the horse, his full attention on their take off point. "Now, boy!" Heero gave the horse the rein he wanted and Zero surged forward, his hind legs pushed off the ground sending his body soaring through the air and landing on the other side. Immediately Heero's legs were on him, hands checking as he drove the stallion back together. Two strides and they were once again airborne. Fore hooves bit deep into the sawdust as Zero landed, his hind end coming down a fraction later and then pushing himself forth. Powerful muscles strained with the effort as the third and most difficult part of the triple rose in front of them and Zero flew into the air yet again.

Duo closed his eyes, Treize began to bite his nails while Zechs found himself doing a Duo and chewing on his hair. Noin was almost white with the tension while Zoe remained calm, her eyes never leaving the pair in the ring.

"Woot! Go Heero!" Zoe cheered quietly as the pair landed safe and sound.

"Yes! He made it," Duo exclaimed and then shut up as Heero still had the dreaded water jump to go.

"Good boy!" Heero told his horse and risked a moment to pat the gray neck before picking up the contact again and turning Zero towards fence ten.

The triple had taken a lot out of Zero and his master could sense this, so Heero took a slightly longer track to jump ten in order to give Zero as much time as possible to re-balance and get himself settled.

More poles stared down at them as they approached, Zero's ears cocked as he gamely leapt into the air and cleared fence ten. As soon as they landed, Heero was riding his horse together and once he had Zero exactly where he wanted, he lined up the water jump and gave Zero his head, legs on the gray's sides and pushing the horse out.

Lengthening his stride, Zero remembered this jump from last time. He'd gotten a hoof wet. He wasn't planning on a repeat! Gathering himself together, Zero lined up the jump, picked his take off point and launched over the water. His forelegs stretched out, reaching for the opposite end and dry land as the water passed beneath them.
Duo sat on the edge of his seat, eyes glued to the steward and his flag, praying and hoping the man wouldn't raise it and indicate that Zero had left a foot in the water.

Zero's front hooves reached for the dry end of the jump and dug in deep, his hind legs followed and he landed with a bit of a jerk, twisting slightly to keep his feet from getting wet. He really didn't like water all that much!

Heero had given his horse as much rein as he could, keeping his body forward and in tune with Zero's. The awkward landing jarred his arm and despite the support bandage that Duo had put on, his arm went numb, fingers and hand refusing to work properly. Gritting his teeth he tried to gather his reins, but his right hand didn't want to cooperate at all.

Sensing something wrong, Zero slowed a fraction, the touch on the bit in his mouth wasn't as strong as it usually was. He only hesitated for a moment though as his master's seat and legs were applied and Zero recognized the signals.

In the early stages of Zero's training, Heero had done a lot of work with the stallion on a loose rein, teaching the horse to obey the leg and seat commands first with the reins and bit as a last aid. Zero remembered his lessons and allowed his master's weight and leg aids tell him where to go.

Shifting his body weight to the right, Heero applied his legs as well, telling Zero to turn. His left hand managed to gather up the reins a bit, although they were still not even and the contact a lot less than Heero would have liked. His horse responded though, turning and heading for the wall, the last jump.

"Something's wrong," Duo said, his eyes straining to try and pick up on what the problem could be.

Immediately, Noin and Treize also narrowed in, trying to see what Duo had picked up on.

"His reins are too long, there's not much contact," Noin stated as her brow furrowed.

"Shit! His arm," Duo said with worry in his voice. He could clearly see Heero struggling with his right hand to pick up his reins.

"What do you mean, his arm?" Noin questioned looking at Duo.

"I'll explain in a moment," Duo replied as he focused totally on Heero and his horse as they bore down on the last jump.

"He will be okay, Duo," Treize said in a quiet voice. "Zero's a well trained horse and if I know Heero that animal has been taught to respond to Heero's seat, leg and weight and not just his reins."

Duo gave the rider a wan smile, knowing Treize's words were meant to make him feel a little better. His gaze returned to Heero and the imposing looking wall.

"Get us over this one and we're almost home, Zero," Heero said to his horse. "Just the finish flags after the wall, boy."

Zero cocked an ear back to listen, he sensed the pain in his master's voice, but felt the urgency through his master's weight and leg aids. With the wall looming before them, Zero knew what had to be done and fixed his sights on the jump ahead. He shortened his stride a touch, picking his take off point, gauging the height of the fence and the amount of effort he would need to put in to clear it.

Heero remained as still as he could, using just his seat and legs to guide his horse and sending a silent prayer that Zero would clear the jump. He felt the muscles bunch and flex as the stallion brought his
hind quarters underneath and began to lift into the air. Heero went forward to follow the movement, grabbing a chunk of Zero's mane with his left hand to keep him steady.

Silence reigned over the arena as the gray horse rose into the air, forelegs tucked neatly beneath as he arched over the top and then stretched those legs out to take the full impact of landing. With Zero coming back to earth, Heero began to sit down in his saddle and look for the finish flags. He tried again to take up more contact with Zero's mouth and this time his right hand began to work a little and he was able to shorten his reins a bit more.

As the gray stallion and his rider passed between the flags a cheer went up from the crowd, people clapping and yelling with delight as one of their own completed his course.

"Clear round for Heero Yuy and Zero!" the commentator announced.

Duo was out of his seat in a flash. Once Heero had passed through those finish flags, Duo had taken off running; Noin, Treize and the rest of the group weren't far behind him.

Having passed through the finish flags, Heero dropped his weight into his saddle and began to pull Zero up. All around them people were cheering and clapping and Zero knew the attention was for him, that he'd been a good boy and he threw in a few dancing steps, much to the crowds amusement. Zero settled and allowed his master to slow him down and guide him to the exit.

Heero was over the moon that he'd managed to go clear, his excitement and happiness threatening to boil over. The feeling in his arm was returning and while it ached something fierce, it didn't pain him quite as much. As he brought Zero to a walk and entered the warm up area, he was accosted by a pair of worried violet eyes and equally excited Duo.

"Are you all right?" Duo asked as Heero brought the stallion to a halt beside him.

"I'll be okay. Jarred the arm over the water jump and it lost all feeling for a moment or two. It's coming back now though," Heero replied honestly. There wasn't any point in lying to his lover, Duo would get the truth out of him sooner or later.

"That's it, Heero! You're gonna get that arm looked at properly by either the medic here or a doctor."

Duo was prevented from saying anything more as Noin arrived on the scene and congratulations rained down on Heero and his horse.

Deciding to let it slip for now and allow Heero his moment of glory, Duo shut up and took Zero's bridle, rubbing the gray on the forehead and telling him what a good boy he'd been. Zero simply wuffled and began to search the nice human for carrots. Duo knew that if Heero was in any severe pain he would let him know. Besides, Heero had worked damn hard for this and it was only fair he should get to relax and bathe in the praise. Duo concentrated on feeding the gray his much loved carrots.

Heero was so happy he felt he would burst. He'd done it! Finally done it and achieved a clear round in international competition. He smiled happily and thanked everyone for their kind wishes. After a few moments, people started to drift off for various reasons, only Noin, Treize and Duo remained with Heero.

"Right. What's this about your arm, Heero?" Noin asked in a tone that said she wasn't too happy.

Heero sighed and dismounted, Duo taking over the task of looking after Zero while Heero explained to Noin. Treize remained to back Heero up and let the team coach know what had happened several weeks ago. Noin wasn't happy that Heero hadn't told her of his injury, but there wasn't anything she
could do about it now. Promising Heero that she wasn't finished with him yet, she left him to take care of his horse and returned to see how the remaining number three riders went.

Heero walked across to where Duo was standing, fussing over Zero and feeding the horse carrots. "I have to see the medic and report back to Noin," Heero said in a flat tone.

"Good. Oh, Heero... I'm so happy for you, you finally did it..." Duo quickly shut up as the emotion threatened to overwhelm him. He was worried for his lover, overjoyed that they had completed a clear round and as proud as hell of the pair of them.

"Let's take Zero back to the stable and make him comfortable, then we can watch the others compete and I promise to see the medic right after," Heero said quietly, understanding just how worried his partner had been.

Duo nodded and the pair made their way back to the stables in silence. Duo wanted to grab his partner and kiss him senseless, wanted to run his hands all over Heero to reassure himself that his lover was fine, but most of all, wanted Heero safely in his arms. Unfortunately, all that would have to wait until they got back to the privacy of their hotel.

Zero was checked over and brushed down. Duo rugged the gray and left him with a haynet to munch on before the pair returned towards the arena. On the way back, Duo spotted a medic and dragged a reluctant Heero over to him, quickly explaining Heero's injury and what had happened during their round of jumping. The medic checked Heero over and re strapped the arm; without proper equipment he couldn't tell if anything had moved inside. He did seem to think that what Heero had done was probably just jarred the arm to the point where one of the pins had connected with a nerve and rendered the arm temporarily useless. He advised Heero getting his own doctor to take a look once they returned home just to be on the safe side.

With the medical check complete, the pair hurried back to the arena just as the steward was calling for the number two riders to be ready. They slipped inside and located the rest of their group, finding seats and sitting with them. Duo let Noin know that Heero had seen a medic and what the medic had said, Noin seemingly happier knowing one of her riders was not in any immediate danger.

"What happened with the other competitors?" Heero asked, diverting the conversation away from himself.

"The Japanese rider scored four faults, as did the German. The French rider went clear though."

"So, we're still neck and neck with the Germans?"

"Yes, but anything can happen, Heero. We need to really keep our focus and pray all goes well for Zoe and Treize."

Heero nodded and turned his attention back to the arena and the Englishman that was jumping now.

The rounds by the second riders weren't anything spectacular. The English rider had four faults, the Italian eight, Swedish rider also had eight while the South African that had been eliminated in the first round came out with just four penalties. The New Zealand rider was unlucky that his horse stumbled and came into fence seven all wrong, leaving him with no other choice but to refuse and therefore score four penalties. Then it was Zoe's turn.

The spectators gave the woman and her game little mare a warm welcome as she rode into the ring. Duo couldn't help but think how small Periwinkle looked against the jumps; some of them seemed taller than the mare herself!
Saluting the judge, Zoe made her way to the start and once the bell sounded, the little mare was off, eagerness to be jumping evident in her stride.

The first three fences were cleared in succession, Periwinkle hopping over them easily. Zoe was quietly confident, knowing her horse’s capabilities and doing her best to ride the mare into each jump so she had the best opportunity to clear it. Jumps four and five were also cleared and the mare turned for fence six.

Zoe was slowly increasing the horse's speed as she went around the course, careful to maintain the impulsion at the same time. Jump six was cleared and the turn to fence seven made with accuracy. Periwinkle stood back off the parallel bars and sailed right over. Jump eight posed no problem and then they were lining up for the triple.

Holding the mare in check, Zoe built up the impulsion as she rode towards the first of the three obstacles. The bay listened to her rider, bringing her hocks right underneath in preparation for the jumps ahead. Three strides away, Zoe let the mare go.

Periwinkle exploded over the first element, landed and took her two strides before soaring into the air again. She landed cleanly and with another stride was rising through the air over the third element. The mare seemed to hang in the air for a moment before landing gracefully and cantering away, her eyes bright and looking for the next jump.

“She's one clever little mare,” Duo said appreciatively.

“Game too,” Treize replied in amusement. He'd always been a supporter of Zoe's. The clever little mare showing more heart over big courses than a lot of her bigger rivals.

Jump ten posed no problem and now Periwinkle was galloping towards the water. The bay shot into the air as if on wings and cleared the water easily. All that remained between them and a clear round was the wall.

As the pair approached the wall, all Duo could see were the tips of Periwinkle's ears over the top row of bricks and he was amazed as the mare launched herself into the air and cleared the wall.

Duo clapped and cheered just as loudly as everyone else, his admiration for the female of both species having risen several notches. With Zoe's clear round confirmed by the commentator, it was once more the mad scramble outside to congratulate the pair.

Zechs remained behind inside the arena to see how the Japanese and German riders fared, joining the group several minutes later with the news that the Japanese rider had collected four faults and the German had gone clear. The French rider exited the arena with the commentator announcing eight faults.

* * *

Treize rode Goose around, trying to settle his nerves and concentrate on the course he would soon be jumping. The South African number one was currently jumping and he would be followed by the New Zealander; Treize would after the Kiwi. Noin had done a quick score add up once the Swedish rider had finished on four faults and informed her team that they were currently sitting neck and neck with the Germans for first place.

If they were to have any chance of winning this cup, Treize had to go clear.

“Treize Khushrenada?” the steward called out and as Treize rode up he continued, “Stay here please, you're next.”
Duck and Joe stood off to the side, the mini pony trying to nose around the wood chip area for anything edible while Joe tried to stop him. Treize smiled and patted the bay neck before him. “This is a tough one, Goose. We have to go clear if we want any chance at winning.”

Goose cocked an ear back and nodded his head as if understanding his master’s words. He lifted a forefoot and pawed impatiently at the ground. The Kiwi exited and Treize found himself riding once more into the arena and determined to give this his very best shot. The cheers from the crowd rang in his ears and his determination firmed. Saluting the judge, Treize pushed Goose into a steady canter and sat deep into his saddle, collecting the stallion together and waiting for the bell to ring. It did and they were off.

The cross bar, straight rails and first spread were all cleared in succession, Goose having no problem with the extra height. Jump four, the off set rails were also cleared and Treize looked for the double. He brought Goose around and steadied the stallion, Goose listening and responding perfectly. The big bay stood well off the first element and cleared it, landing and gathering himself together for the second part which was also cleared. From there it was on to fence six, the gate.

Goose soared over the gate, landed, took four strides and began to turn. Ahead the parallel bars appeared and Goose cocked his ears, tugging at the reins. Treize sat down hard and brought the stallion back to hand, only giving the rein to the animal when they were three strides away. Landing over the parallel bars, Goose tossed in a small buck, he was enjoying himself and wanted to express his feelings. A murmur of laughter rippled through the crowd at the bay’s antics.

"So far, so good," Heero said softly.

"I don't think I can watch," Zechs said as Treize cleared jump eight and began to head for the triple.

"Well, you're not going to chew on my hair," Duo teased. "You've got enough of your own. 'Sides, I think I'm starting to get split ends."

Zechs opted to ignore Duo and began to bite his fingernails instead, much to Duo's amusement.

Treize steadied the bay, driving the energy back into those powerful hind quarters. He was fully aware of the mistake he’d made in his first round, letting Goose run out of impulsion and he was determined not to make the same mistake this time. He sat down hard, using everything he had to drive the bay together. Goose fought for his head, the muscles in his rump straining as his stride shortened and he became almost like a coiled spring.

Keeping his horse in check, Treize slowly approached the triple, concentration firmly on the jump ahead and giving his horse every opportunity to clear the jump. In the crowd watching, people were holding their breath and praying to whatever gods were listening.

Seeing his take off point, Treize sat down hard, gave the bay his head and drove his legs against the horse’s sides. Goose leapt forward, eager to jump. Hocks came well under, pushing the big horse into the air, Goose rising up and clearing the first element.

"Oh god, I think I'm having a heart attack," Zechs moaned.

"Well, could you do it a little more quietly, some of us are trying to watch here," Duo muttered back.

Goose landed, Treize drew rein and applied the leg, the bay’s hind quarters coming back underneath him and finding the energy needed to propel himself into the air again and over the second element. Forelegs tucked neatly under his body, Goose arched over the second element and then landed safely. Immediately Treize was there, his seat and leg driving Goose together and giving the bay the
energy he needed. One stride and they were airborne again, muscles straining as Goose pushed himself to the limits.

"Tell me when it's over," Zechs moaned.

"There, there, it will all be over soon," Duo soothed, his hand patting Zechs on the arm in a comforting gesture.

Heero couldn't help the snicker.

Zoe was almost wetting herself in her seat with the excitement and Noin appeared to have everything crossed that one could possibly cross, except her eyes as she watched Treize and Goose jumping the third element of the triple.

Hooves bit down into the arena surface as Goose landed, pushing his hind end under him and cantering away from the jump. Treize couldn't help the sigh of relief and following grin.

"Good, boy," he murmured and patted the bay neck. Concentration once again on the course, Treize turned and rode towards fence ten. Goose hopped neatly over ten and then let fly as Treize urged him on to the water. They jumped into the air, Goose seeming to flatten out and become a bay missile as they shot over the water and landed cleanly on the other side.

"Just one to go, Zechs, then we can find you a nice, quiet nursing home to go to and recover," Duo teased.

"I think a hospital would be a better choice," Zechs moaned. "I'm sure my heart is giving out."

"One to go" Noin said. "Steady, Treize, don't let it all go now. You're nearly home."

Treize shortened his reins and drove Goose together, sighting the wall and riding his horse towards it. Goose responded, large strides eating up the ground as he measured the size of the jump and picked his take off point. Seconds later they were flying through the finish flags and the crowd was going wild.

"Clear round!"

* * *

All teams had completed their courses and were now waiting around for their respective team coaches to return from the stewards' room where they'd all gone to advise the stewards of which score they would be dropping from their team in the second round. Then it was up to the stewards to work out the final scores and thus the placings.

Duo was chewing his fingernails, Heero picked at the strapping on his arm. Treize was talking quietly with Zechs and Zoe, Joe was brushing down Tall Geese. Alex was trying to keep the mood light but they all knew it wasn't working. Until Noin came back with the results they were all on edge. Even doing the math in their heads, they couldn't be sure what the final result was going to be. Heero thought they would be in the top three, Treize hopeful for first while Zoe thought they were probably first or second.

The figure of Noin appeared and her face was neutral, not giving anything away. Immediately the team spotted her they bombarded her with questions. Noin put up her hands in defense.

"Quiet everyone. We have to go down to the main arena where the announcement will be made. I'm not allowed to say anything until then."
Grumbling about the unfairness, the team and grooms all filed along behind Noin, Heading for the arena. When they got there they milled around with the other teams, all of them in the same boat. The public address system crackled into life and everyone went quiet.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the results of the Nations Cup show jumping competition. In fourth place, with a two round combined score of sixteen penalties; New Zealand!"

The roar went up from the crowd.

"In third place, with a combined overall score of twelve penalties; England."

Again the crowd cheered and the English team began to congratulate each other.

"Now, we seem to have a bit of a problem, Ladies and gentlemen. It would appear we have a tie for first place. With a total, overall combined score of four penalties the German team and the Australian team have tied for first. This means we will be having a jump off!"

The crowd roared its approval. Once the noise had died down enough, the commentator continued.

"The respective coaches of the two tied nations have been asked to select one of their team members to jump off against the clock over a shortened course. We will let you know in just a moment who those two riders will be."

All eyes from the Australian team turned to Noin.

"We tied for first?" Heero said, the joy evident in his voice.

"That's great!" Zoe was dancing on the spot.

"Who is going to be the rider to jump off?" Duo asked Noin. The rest of the team fell silent as they waited for the coach to let them know who would be competing in the jump off against Germany.

"It hasn't been an easy decision, but I've made my choice."

~ * ~

tbc...
Chapter 61

"It hasn't been an easy decision, but I've made my choice."

Three riders and several grooms looked expectantly at the woman.

"I've decided that our rider to jump off will be Treize."

For a moment there was silence, each rider and groom letting the words sink in as various emotions passed through them.

"The reasons for my decision are: Zoe, although you've competed in international competition before, I think the pressure will be too much and Periwinkle has done enough. She's already completed one speed event as well as two rounds of cup competition. Those are very big fences out there and I don't want a good horse ruined through over jumping. Heero..."

Heero turned to look at the coach, he had a pretty good idea of why he hadn't been selected and in one way was grateful.

"Both you and Zero would be fine in this sort of jump off when you've both had a little more experience in international competition. Your arm and the injury to it has decided for you though. I'm not going to put either you or your horse at risk. You have nothing to be ashamed of, under the circumstances you've done exceptionally well."

"Thank you," Heero replied. He knew his arm would be the deciding factor in his case and he held no malice towards the woman for passing over him. She needed to make a tough decision, one that would give the team the best chance and as far as Heero was concerned, Treize was the best person for the job.

"I've chosen you, Treize, mainly because of the experience you have; also with Goose being a stallion he's got a little more stamina than Periwinkle. Goose is a damn fine horse and you're a good rider. Does anyone have any questions?"

No one did, all understanding, respecting and agreeing with Noin's decision.

"Right. Treize, I suggest you leave your groom to get your horse ready while we head back to the arena. They're figuring out what the jump off course is going to be and will let us know shortly. The heights won't change, neither will the width of the jumps, but I'm betting they will include the triple in the shortened course. Once it's announced we will need to walk it."

"Oh crap. I don't think I'm going to survive this," Zechs muttered. "It was bad enough watching the last round, but now I've got to sit through it all again?! Geeze, I could sure use a stiff scotch right now."

Duo looked at the other vet and snickered. "Welcome to the world of competition, Zechs."

Zechs opted to simply groan. If he was feeling this nervous he could not begin to imagine how Treize was feeling.

"Knew I should have packed the Valium," Duo said with a grin.
"I think I'm going to go find the gents and be quietly sick," Zechs huffed and walked off.

"You really shouldn't tease him like that, Duo," Heero said with a slight smile.

"I know, but I can't help it," Duo returned. "Don't worry, I promise not to tease him through the jump off, in fact, I'll even hold his hand and whisper reassurances in his ear if you like?"

Heero's eyes narrowed a fraction and he moved close enough to whisper in Duo's ear. "Just as long as you behave yourself and remember that it's my bed you sleep in. Which reminds me; I think you have a promise to keep tonight."

"Ohh, yeah. Don't you worry, Heero. I made a promise and I'm not about to break it." Duo gave his lover a soft smile and licked his lips. "I'm going to see if Joe needs a hand with Goose."

Joe accepted Duo's offer of help and the pair soon had Goose saddled up and ready to go. Joe led the big bay out of his stable and towards the collecting ring area. Duo followed behind with Duck and Heero. Zechs caught them up and tagged along too. Once they were in the collection ring area there was nothing to do but wait for Treize and Noin to return and find out what the course would be.

* * *

Noin and Treize returned to the arena, both locked in their own thoughts. Treize was honored that he had been chosen and was determined to do his best. Reaching the arena, Noin left Treize for a moment to confirm with the officials that Treize would be the rider representing Australia in the jump off. By the time she had returned, the course designer had finished his check of the shorter course that would be used for the jump off and advised the officials that the two opposing countries could now walk the course.

Approaching the chief steward, Noin and the German coach were given slips of paper with the jump off course written on them. Noin took a quick look and then passed the paper to Treize.

Treize scanned the paper. "Shit! That's one tough jump off," he remarked.

"I agree;" replied Noin. "Come on, we can walk it now and that will give us a better idea of turns, angles, line and track."

Treize followed the coach into the arena, the noise level quite high as the spectators all discussed amongst themselves various topics of conversation. Treize looked at the paper again. The jumps selected for the jump off were: One, two, five A, five B, seven, nine A, nine B, nine C, eleven and twelve. Yes, it was going to be a difficult course.

"The best place to try and save time will be from fences five B to seven," Noin said as she walked the course with Treize. "You can cut on the inside of fence six and save seconds, but you will need to have Goose listening to you completely to make the turn successfully."

"Makes sense," Treize murmured as his eyes followed an imaginary line from jump five B to seven. It wouldn't be an easy turn to pull off, but if one could, it would save time. The rest of the course didn't offer much of an opportunity to cut corners and save seconds. As Noin pointed out, one could try to gain a little ground from seven to nine A but given the height and width of the three elements comprising jump nine, it would be a very big risk. Treize decided against that; he'd take a little longer track and ensure his horse had every chance to keep impulsion and clear the hated triple.

They walked the course a couple more times, Treize setting out his line and track in his head. He noted the Germans had selected Herrman Schultz to represent them. It didn't surprise Treize, Herrman was by far the German's best rider so it made perfect sense. Treize also knew he would be a
hard man to beat. With the course firmly lodged in his mind, Treize left the arena with Noin and returned to the rest of the team waiting outside.

"What's the jump off course like?"

"Any idea who you're riding against?"

"I'll bet they left the triple in."

The questions hit the pair as they met up with everyone. "Whoa! Hold on, everyone," Noin said as she raised her hands. Everyone immediately shut up. "Thank you. Now, in answer to your questions..." Noin filled the rest of the group in on the course, plan of attack and who the opposing rider was. Zoe groaned in sympathy when she heard the triple was still in, Heero frowned at Herrman's name while Zechs simply looked stunned by it all.

Leaving Noin to answer the questions, Treize walked over to Joe and Goose, patting the big bay gently and rubbing the stallion's muzzle. Goose responded by pushing his nose deeper into Treize's hand.

"What's it like, boss?" Joe asked.

"It's going to be tough, Joe. Goose is capable of pulling it off just as long as we keep our concentration and I manage to keep Goose full of impulsion," Treize replied as he checked his girth and tightened it a couple of holes.

"You'll do fine," Joe said with a reassuring smile. "Goose is a good horse and he's raring to go."

"Thanks, Joe." Treize pulled the stirrups down and prepared to mount, Joe holding the bay's bit.

With the questions all answered for now, the team all came over to wish Treize good luck. Treize would be jumping first as they were following the draw of the countries. Several other competitors from the different nations came over to wish Treize good luck as well much to Zechs' surprise.

"Funny thing the world of the equestrian sport," Duo said from where he was standing, still holding Duck beside Zechs. "You wouldn't think the opposition would want to give you the time of day given that you're competing against each other, and yet here they are, all offering good wishes."

Zechs gave a soft smile. "It's nice to know that sportsmanship is still alive and well." His eyes were trained on his lover, watching the man graciously accepting the well wishes whilst keeping his mind focused on the job ahead.

Noin called for them all to go into the arena and find seating as the jump off would be starting shortly. Duo handed Duck over to Joe and with Heero, went to pass on his own good wishes to Treize. "Good luck, Treize. I know you can do it," Duo said as he patted the bay stallion's neck.

"Thanks, Duo. I'll certainly be trying my best."

"Go for it, Treize," Heero said quietly. "Noin's picked the right person for this; if anyone can do it, you can."

Treize blushed a little at the praise. "Don't count your chickens, Heero," he warned. "I'll do the best I can."

With a nod, Heero turned and with a pointed look at Duo, left Treize alone with Zechs.
Zechs stepped up beside the bay horse and looked into his lover's eyes. "Be careful, don't take unnecessary risks." Zechs placed his hand on Treize's knee and squeezed lightly.

“I'll try,” Treize replied. The ginger haired man gazed down into the sapphire eyes of his partner. “Thank you,” he said softly.

The blonde raised an eyebrow. “You’re thanking me? For what?”

“For giving me support, for making the trip here, for simply being you.”

Zechs felt his cheeks flush. “I wish I could kiss you right now.”

“So do I. I'll take a rain check for now though.”

“Done. Good luck, stay safe.” Zechs gave one last squeeze to Treize's knee and turned, catching up with Duo and Heero to go and watch the final jump off. His heart pounded in his chest and butterflies had taken up residence in his stomach. Maybe that Valium Duo had mentioned earlier wasn't such a bad idea!

Treize shortened his reins and gave Goose the aid to walk, the bay responded and Treize guided the stallion away from the crowd to warm up.

* * *

“Ladies and gentlemen, the jump off course for the Nations cup will be: Fences one, two, five A, five B, seven, nine A, nine B, nine C, eleven and twelve. The winner will be the Nation whose rider completes the course in the fastest time with the least penalties. The two representatives will be...”

The silence inside the arena was almost suffocating as the spectators all waited for the much anticipated announcement.

“Representing Australia; Treize Khushrenada riding Tall Geese.”

The crowd erupted into cheers, whistles and shouts. It took a few moments for the noise to die down enough for the commentator to be heard.

“Representing Germany; Herrman Schultz riding Shadow.” Again the crowd began to cheer and clap, the commentator having to try three times before the noise lessened and he was able to continue. “The first rider in the jump off will be Treize Khushrenada.”

The clapping and cheering resumed as a very determined looking Treize rode into the arena. He gave a nod towards the crowd and then proceeded towards the judge’s box, the crowd fell into silence as Treize saluted and then gathered his horse together ready to start his round.

The bell went and Goose bounded forward through the start flags and headed for the first jump.

“Steady,” Treize muttered as he took a firmer hold on his reins. He wanted to start off at a steady pace and build the speed as he went. It was vital he kept the impulsion throughout though and he could only do that if Goose was listening to him and not going too fast.

Goose slowed his pace a fraction and gathered himself together. He could feel something slightly different with his master, sense it and knew he needed to listen. The first jump appeared before them and Goose sailed over it.

Heero gave a small smile as he watched his teacher and mentor begin his round. He could see the
concentration, note the determination and could only admire Treize for his skill.

“How’s he doing? Isn't he going a little slow if this is against the clock?” Zechs whispered as his eyes stayed glued on his partner.

“He’s doing fine, Zechs,” Duo replied.

“He’s not really going slow, he’s starting out steady and if I know Treize he will increase his speed and impulsion as he goes around, hopefully he will have enough to clear the triple by the time he gets to it,” Heero said quietly.

“Ah, okay.” Zechs went quiet and began to gnaw on his thumbnail.

Having cleared fence one, Treize and Goose were rapidly approaching jump two. The electronic clock ticked away the seconds as the horse and rider closed in on the second jump. Goose gathered himself together and flew into the air, landing neatly on the other side. Treize sat down in his saddle and shortened his reins, legs applied themselves to the horse's sides and Goose responded by drawing his hind quarters underneath him and shortening his stride whilst building the impulsion.

Treize had calculated he could shave off a few seconds if he could turn Goose quickly and take the track to fence five by passing on the inside of the water jump and not the outside which was longer. It would be a calculated risk, but one he was confident his horse could pull off.

Goose felt the aid to turn and pivoted neatly on his hind legs, turning and passing the water jump. Treize glanced over his shoulder to see exactly where fence five was and where he would need to turn to bring Goose into it properly. Picking his point, Treize turned the stallion again and began their approach to the double.

"Clever cookie," Heero muttered.

"How so?” Zechs asked. Zechs figured if he was going to attend shows with Treize like Duo did it would be to his benefit to learn more about the sport and the only way to do that was to ask questions.

"By cutting on the inside he’s saved a few seconds in time. To go around the outside and pass between jumps eleven and three would take more time, even though the horse would have a better chance at building impulsion. Goose is a seasoned horse and more than capable of making tight turns and still retain impulsion."

"Ah. I get it,” Zechs replied as he followed Heero's explanation and the finger that traced the imaginary line to back up the words.

"Easy, Goose," Treize soothed as the bay fought for his head. The first element of the double lay ahead, poles seeming to form a never ending barrier as they rose ever upward. Goose pricked his ears and steadied his pace. Three strides away, Treize let him go, the bay bounding forward and soaring into the air over the first element. They landed and Treize applied his legs, Goose responding and gathering himself together for the second element.

Treize knew that he didn't have much in the way of time or distance to get his horse back together once they landed and so as soon as Goose’s forelegs touched the ground, Treize was sitting deep and shortening his reins.

"This is the tough one,” Heero said.

Both Zechs and Duo turned to look at him, Zechs removing the abused thumbnail he'd been
gnawing on from his mouth.

"He's going to need to have Goose's complete attention to make the turn and clear jump seven. Trust me, this is where it's going to be won or lost."

"Crap. I'm getting too old for this," Zechs muttered.

Duo gave the other vet a soft look and gently took his hand, patting it reassuringly. "It's okay, Zechs. It's quite normal to be this nervous when your partner is out there, risking everything for the honor of his nation. If you like I can see if the medics have a walking frame you can borrow, or maybe a wheelchair? Some oxygen might be a good idea too."

Heero gave a soft snort of amusement, Zechs looked completely stunned for a moment and then his brain kick started. "Walking frame? Oxygen?" he hissed.

Duo looked calmly at him. "Only trying to help. You did say you were getting too old. Come to think of it, I think I can see a few gray hairs starting..." Duo went to touch Zechs' hair as if pointing out said gray hairs only to have his hand batted away.

"I'll have you know I'm not going gray, I'm still capable of walking and I'm only a couple of years older than you!"

"Ahh, but having a partner competing in nerve wracking sports such as show jumping certainly makes you age a lot quicker," Duo teased.

Zechs caught the glint in Duo's eye and knew the other man was simply stirring him up. "If that's true then you should be bed ridden by now," he quipped.

Heero almost choked on his laughter with the look on Duo's face as the blonde returned fire with his own teasing. Duo looked stunned and lost for words for a moment, but then the demeanor changed and Heero knew Duo was about to come back with an equally witty remark.

"Ohh, how did you know I like to be ridden in bed? You been peeking, Zechs?"

It was Zechs' turn to look stunned, the blonde vet's face changing colors rapidly until he was a bright red. Eventually he managed to get his voice to work. "Touché," he conceded.

Feeling now would be an appropriate time to intervene and distract the pair from their bantering before things got even more embarrassing for Zechs, and himself too, Heero changed the topic. "Quiet, guys, Treize is about to come into jump seven."

The pair promptly put their verbal sparring on hold and turned to watch.

Goose landed over part B, felt the aids from his master and followed through with his body. Hind legs came under, pushing the bay forward for two strides and then sank deep into the ground’s surface to turn. Fore legs swung around as Goose almost performed a pirouette on the spot, spinning around and then pushing himself forward again, muscles straining as the horse drove his body forward and passed between fences six and seven.

Treize kept one eye on jump seven and the other ahead to the point he'd picked to make his second turn and bring Goose into the parallel bars. They reached that point and again Treize sat deep, asking his horse to turn. Goose responded, once more bringing his hind quarters right underneath and pivoting around. With the turn complete, Treize concentrated on bringing Goose in on the correct line, steadying and pushing the stallion together.
Hands held the horse in check until three strides away when Treize gave Goose his head and drove his legs against the bay's sides, urging the horse forward. Goose took his three strides and then launched himself into the air, front legs folding underneath as the hind end stretched out behind. The poles passed underneath and then Goose was reaching out with those front legs to take the impact of landing.

"Beautifully done," Noin commented, continuing to watch the pair, her heart in her mouth as she willed them both on.

Heero was sweating, his hands curled into fists; body subconsciously following and mimicking Treize's movements as if he were riding the bay himself.

Zechs had gone paler and replaced chewing on his abused thumbnail with the edge of his jacket. Duo had resumed pulling at the tufted end of his braid, the tension really starting to build. Even though it wasn't Heero out there, Duo could still feel nervous for Treize and only pray and hope the rider would come through with a good time, clear round and both his horse and himself intact.

"Now for the nasty one, Goose," Treize murmured. "We cleared it before, we can do it again, just listen to me."

Goose cocked an ear back, his body thrumming with the excitement of jumping.

Treize guided the stallion past jump eight, sitting down into his saddle and collecting the horse as he did so. Goose began to shorten his stride and build the impulsion he would need. Picking his spot Treize turned and lined up the triple ahead. The clock ticked away the seconds, the spectators all silent and holding their breath as the rider and his horse prepared for the jump ahead.

Goose shortened his stride even more, cantering practically on the spot as Treize inched him forward, steadily building the energy until he reached the point where Goose was all but ready to explode underneath him. Letting the reins slip a little through his fingers, Treize applied his legs and rode the stallion forward, Goose bounding up to the first element and lifting into the air.

Zechs closed his eyes and grabbed Duo's arm. "I can't watch," he groaned.

"There, there," Duo soothed.

Heero was on the edge of his seat, fidgeting as he watched the horse and rider clear the first element, beside him Zoe grabbed Carol's arm, the two women hoping and praying Treize would go clear. Noin sat with her eyes never leaving the rider, her heart was hammering in her chest, willing the pair along.

Goose landed and took two strides before launching into the air again, powerful hind legs pushing the body up and over the sea of poles. Treize followed the movement of his horse, hands going forward and giving the horse his head while Treize's body seemed to melt into Goose's, the pair becoming one with each other. They landed, Treize applying the leg and riding the stallion on. Muscles bunched and strained, Goose grunted as he pushed off from the ground once more, soaring high into the air and reaching for the width of the last element. Treize sat still in his saddle, trying not to interfere with the horse in any way, simply following with his body and preparing for the landing.

The stallion let his forelegs come through and bite into the sawdust, hind hooves following and pushing him away from the jump. A ripple of applause went up from the crowd but Treize didn't hear it, his attention was focused on collecting his horse together and turning to head for jump eleven. Having gathered up his reins and he brought Goose back a little, setting his sights on the water jump and pushing the stallion forward. Spotting the water ahead, Goose flicked his tail and
lengthened out his stride, almost galloping towards the aquatic spread. He flew into the air, like a bullet from a gun and sailed over the water jump. He landed on the opposite side with a couple of feet to spare.

"Shit!" Duo said and whistled though his teeth. "He's sure got some stretch on him."

Zechs simply watched, he was feeling sick again and knew he wouldn't feel any differently until his lover had finished the course and was safely in his arms.

Having cleared the water successfully there only remained the wall to go. Treize checked his horse and brought Goose back to a more controlled pace, the bay listening and eager to jump. They made a right hand turn and Goose lined up the wall ahead. The stallion pulled hard against Treize, the rider using all his skill to prevent Goose from rushing the jump, knowing if he let the horse go it would spell disaster for them both. Keeping a tight rein, Treize allowed the bay to close the distance, steadily building momentum and then unleashing the power to soar high into the air and clear the wall with little effort. Goose landed safely and immediately Treize rode him hard to the finish flags, the stallion flattening out and galloping as if the devil were on his heels.

They flashed through and the electronic timer stopped; all eyes turned to the glowing, red digits.

The time blinked back at them. 38:43

A roar went up from the crowd, cheering and clapping wildly as the rider in the arena slowed his horse and lavished pats to the bay neck.

"Yes! Way to go, Treize!" Heero shouted, echoing the thoughts of the rest of the team.

Zoe was bouncing in her seat, excitement written into every line of her body. "That was fantastic!" she enthused.

Alex, Charlie and Carol were similarly expressing their excitement while Zechs had slumped in his seat, shoulders sagging as relief swept through him leaving him emotionally drained. Duo had put an arm around his shoulders and simply grinned at the exhausted blonde.

"Not easy to be the support crew, is it?" Duo snickered.

"You got that right," Zechs returned wearily.

"Good boy, Goose. Good boy." Treize managed a wave to the crowd as he exited the ring and the German rode in.

"Clear round in a time of 38:43," the commentator announced. "Now we have Herrman Schultz from Germany. Can he also go clear and beat the time set by Treize Khushrenada?"

In the arena the rest of the Australian team remained seated, Treize would join them in a moment to watch the German ride. Only Noin had departed, mainly to check the pair were okay, offer her congratulations and bring Treize back to where they were all sitting.

Herrman saluted the judge, the arena went quiet and the bell sounded. Collecting his horse, the German rode to the start flags, passed through and began his round.

Treize returned with Noin just as Herrman cleared the second fence. He sat down next to Zechs and discreetly bumped shoulders with his lover. "You okay?" Treize whispered.

"I am now," Zechs replied with a warm smile. "Congratulations, you rode magnificently."
"Thank you. It was all Goose though. He's a great horse."

"So is his rider," Zechs said softly.

Further congratulation were passed in whispered tones, Treize accepting them all graciously, knowing he'd done all he could and it was now up to the German to try and beat his time. The German rider was determined and it showed in his approach to the course. He was riding accurately, keeping his horse balanced and full of impulsion. It was going to be a very close contest.

Herrman did the same as Treize, landing over fence two and practically sitting his horse down on the spot to make the turn to bring him to fence five. The horse responded perfectly, executing an almost impossible turn, striding out and then clearing the double. Again the German showed his skill as he brought his horse almost to a halt and turned, gaining valuable time with such a turn.

Treize was on tenterhooks and joined Zechs and Duo in the nail biting stakes, chewing his own with nervous anticipation. Zechs swatted Treize's hand from his mouth, Duo snorted at the antics but wisely kept silent.

The German's horse completed his turn and strode out, long legs eating up the distance before turning again and lining up the parallel bars. The track Herrman took was slightly shorter than the one Treize had opted for, Treize deciding he'd give Goose an extra couple of strides and make sure he cleared fence seven. The German's gray turned, gathered his hind legs underneath him and sprinted towards jump seven. The crowd all held their breath.

"Too short," Heero murmured as he dug his fingernails into his palm, the tension becoming too much.

"Oh shit, that's asking an awful lot from the horse," Duo commented when he watched the horse turn and saw the short run up to the fence the rider had taken. There were roughly five strides before the horse would need to take off Duo calculated, a tough task given the height and width of the jump.

Herrman though seemed to have no qualms about the shortness of the lead in to the jump, he gathered his horse together and with a skill borne of years in the saddle, managed to get the gray together, balanced and rode at the jump. The gray leapt into the air, gave a twist of his hind legs and scraped over the top of the jump. The top, back pole rocked in the cups but didn't fall.

"Well, stuff me," Zechs commented.

"No thanks, I'll leave that to Treize," Duo whispered.

"Duo!" Heero hissed.

"Sorry," Duo grinned.

A few 'Ohhs' and 'Ahhs' passed through the spectators as they watched the gray land safely, the pole sitting secure again in its cups. If the near miss had affected the German rider, he didn't let it show, gathering his horse together and riding on to the next fence, jump nine. Treize glanced at the time and did a quick calculation in his head. It was going to be damn close if the German went clear.

Part A loomed ahead, Herrman bringing his horse almost to a standstill as he built the impulsion up. Suddenly the horse exploded forward, legs stretching out as the stallion hurtled towards the first element, took off and soared into the air. They landed safely, took two strides and leapt into the air again. When the gray landed, Herrman applied his leg and pushed the horse forward, the stallion responding and putting in a huge leap over part C. They cleared that too and were cantering away, the German turning and lining up the water jump. The gray flattened out, galloping towards the
water and then launching himself across it. Hooves bit deep into the dirt as they landed on the opposite 'bank' and immediately the German was collecting his horse again.

"It's going to be tight," Heero stated as he watched the clock with one eye and the rider with the other.

Treize was sweating, holding his breath and while part of him was hoping the German would make a mistake, he couldn't help but admire the way the man rode.

Herrman wasn't about to make any mistakes though. He brought his horse together and rode at the wall, the gray bounding into the air and sailing cleanly over it. As soon as hooves touched down, Herrman was urging the animal forward, aiming for the finish flags and thus break the timing beam and stop the clock.

All eyes were trained on the numbers counting away on the large clock. The gray broke the beam and a cry went up from the spectators.

"Clear round in a time of 38:39," the commentator announced. "Ladies and gentlemen, Germany wins the Nations cup event by four hundredths of a second!"

Treize slumped in his seat, the adrenaline leaving his body and allowing exhaustion to take over. He'd tried, he'd given it everything he had and despite there only being four hundredths of a second between them, Treize still felt he'd let his country down. That wasn't how the rest of the team felt though, and they were quick to tell him.

"You did great, Treize," Heero congratulated.

"Excellent try, Treize," Zoe stated. "I don't think Periwinkle would have managed the time you set."

"Treize, you have nothing to be disappointed about, you rode an excellent round, you should be proud of your horse and yourself. The closeness of the time between you and the German rider is a testimony to how good you both are and I'm honored to have been a coach to not only such a good rider as yourself, but to an entire team of people who are hard working, dedicated and wonderful sportsmen and women. I'm proud of you all." Noin gave each of them a smile. "Well done, all of you and thank you."

The team members and grooms all blushed and looked suitably embarrassed at the praise from their coach.

"Okay, praise time over. Grand parade and presentations will be in two hours. I expect you all to be immaculately turned out, that's both your horses and yourselves. I'll meet you all in the stables in an hour and a half; that will give us enough time to check ourselves over and be present in the collecting ring for the parade. Any questions?"

No one had so Noin left them to their own devices, she had to present to the stewards’ room for the official notification of placings. Once that was over she would need to deal with the press who would be hovering like vultures, eager to have an interview with the team coach and hopefully Treize as well. Noin was determined they wouldn't speak with Treize until after the grand parade. By that time Treize would have come to terms with his close loss and be in a much better frame of mind to talk to the reporters, not that he had anything to be ashamed of, he'd ridden magnificently as far as Noin was concerned. The German rider was one of the world’s best and for Treize to finish that close spoke for itself.

Wandering back to the stables, everyone was still congratulating Treize and asking questions about
the course, how he'd felt, what it had been like and so on. Treize was answering as honestly as he could, although he didn't really remember a whole lot of it, he'd been far too focused on finishing clear.

"Hey, Alex?" Zoe began. Alex turned to the woman. "How are you going to manage for the grand parade? Firefox can't be ridden so are you going to walk in on foot while the rest of us ride?"

"I guess so," Alex responded. It was true, Fox couldn't be ridden so Alex would have to walk.

"You can borrow Short Duck to ride in if you want," Treize offered.

The rest of the group dissolved into fits of laughter, the thought of Alex with his long legs sitting astride the mini pony too much for them to cope with.

Alex grinned and gave Treize a wink. "Thanks, I just might take you up on that offer."

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The stable area was a hive of activity, grooms, riders and horses seemed to be everywhere as everyone prepared for the grand parade. Riders from other nations kept coming up and congratulating Treize on his round, and the rest of the team for their efforts as well. Treize found himself blushing on more than one occasion with all the praise being heaped upon him and wondered if he would ever get the red tinge to leave his cheeks.

Treize had disappeared for a few moments, he'd gone to find Herrman from the German team and congratulate him on his superb effort. The German rider had been most pleasant, speaking in broken English and congratulating Treize on his efforts as well. Herrman had admitted that Treize had set one heck of a time to beat and he wasn't sure if he'd done it; well, not until the commentator had confirmed it over the public address system. After a few minutes spent happily chatting and swapping stories, Treize left the German to finish getting ready for the grand parade and returned to his own horse.

Noin had dealt with the stewards and the press, promising them a full interview with all the team members after the grand parade and presentations. Heero grumbled a bit about that, but accepted that the press had a job to do and the nation deserved to know what had happened during the competition. With Fox out of action, Noin had been told of the suggestion Alex ride Duck in the grand parade. Needless to say, Noin had almost had a cardiac arrest from all the laughing she did. Dismissing the idea, she countered with one of her own.

As Alex wouldn't be able to ride and the other three would be on their respective mounts, why didn't Alex lead Short Duck and carry the flag?

Everyone thought that was a great idea and as neither Treize nor Alex had any objections it was settled. Joe immediately got to work on the mini pony, making him presentable for the parade. Duo had finished with Zero, only having to put the horse's bridle on when Heero and the rest of the team were ready so he went to give Joe a hand with Duck.

"Everyone get mounted up," Noin called. "We need to be in the collecting area in ten minutes."

Heero slipped his arms into his jacket and did up his helmet while Duo put the bridle on Zero and led the stallion out. Zero looked immaculate, Duo had even managed to get a silvery glow to the horse's coat, no easy task as gray horses very rarely 'shone' like a chestnut or a bay. Heero looked equally as smart in his tailored jacket, jodhpurs and boots. Duo felt the lump of pride lodge in his chest again and grinned broadly.

Taking the reins, Heero thanked Duo and prepared to mount, the other riders doing the same. They all filed out and lined up where Noin could inspect them and make sure everything was just perfect. Alex, also dressed immaculately in his riding attire, led Duck out and stood between Zoe and Treize. Noin went over each one of them, tucking a stray strap back into its keeper here and wiping a spot of dust off a boot there. Satisfied she stepped back and smiled at them all.

"You're all turned out perfectly. Thank you to your grooms for doing a lovely job on the horses, they are a credit to you and your country. Alex, when we enter the arena I want you to walk in front of the other three with Duck and the flag. I'll give you the flag just before you go into the arena. When it's time for the presentations, all four of you are to step forward, even though you didn't ride in the second round, you're still a part of this team, Alex." Noin gave the young man a warm smile. "Thank
you all for being excellent competitors, showing great sportsmanship and giving up your time to come here and jump for your nation. I'm very proud of you all and so is your country. Well done, everyone."

All the team members looked suitably embarrassed at Noin's praise and fidgeted. Treize was the one who broke the silence.

"Thank you for being a great coach, Miss Noin. Without you and your hard work and dedication, we wouldn't have finished as high in the placings as we have. It's been a pleasure to work with you."

"Hear, hear," the rest of the team said in unison.

Noin blushed and smiled. "Come on, we need to get to the collecting ring now, the parade will be starting very shortly and you don't want to miss out on your moment of glory."

The team members all turned their horses and began to ride towards the collecting ring, the grooms and Noin following along behind.

* * *

The grand parade was nothing short of spectacular. All the competitors from the start to the end of the games were there; those that had been fortunate enough to place, proudly had their ribbons and rosettes displayed on their horses. The spectators cheered and clapped as the many horses and riders made their way into the arena. It had been a full four days of competition with some spectacular displays of horsemanship and the crowd showed their appreciation by cheering loudly. When the teams from the Nations cup event rode into the ring, the cheers got even louder. The Germans were given a warm welcome but when the Australians entered it was nothing short of an all out yelling match. Whistles, shouts and applause greeted the team as Alex and Short Duck entered, Heero, Zoe and Treize following right behind. In the stands, Duo, Zechs and the rest of the grooms cheered just as loudly as the rest of the crowd.

The teams completed their lap of honor and were guided to their place by a steward in preparation for the presentations. Once a reasonable quiet had descended, the announcer began to speak, introducing the president of the Equestrian Federation of Australia who would be presenting the rosettes and cup to the place getters in the Nations cup event.

"In fourth place with a total combined score of sixteen penalties: New Zealand!"

The New Zealand team rode forward to accept their green rosettes, each rider shaking hands with the president of the E.F.A. And exchanging a few words. Once the presentation was finished, the New Zealand team returned to their place and the commentator spoke again.

"In third place with a combined two round score of twelve penalties: England!"

The English team rode forward, smiles on their faces as the crowd applauded. Once again the president stepped forward and placed a white rosette on each horse's bridle before congratulating and shaking hands with the riders. The English team turned and rode back to their place in the line up.

"In second place with a combined score of four penalties and a jump off time of 38:43 seconds: Australia!"

The crowd erupted into cheers and applause as Alex walked forward, the rest of the team behind him. The president stepped forward and was handed a red rosette by the steward which he placed on Periwinkle's bridle. "Congratulations, you rode very well," the president said.
“Thank you,” Zoe replied, the smile on her face almost reaching her ears.

The president went to Alex next and placed the red rosette on Duck’s bridle. “Surely this isn't the horse you competed on?” he asked with a touch of amusement.

“No, sir,” Alex laughed. “This is the team mascot, my horse was injured during the first round and was unable to compete in the second round.”

“Nothing serious, I hope?”

“No, just a small tear in the skin of his cannon bone. He'll be fine in a few weeks.”

“Good to hear it. Well done.” The president shook Alex's hand and gave Short Duck a pat before moving on to Heero.

Zero lowered his head as the president approached, the man smiling and fixing the red rosette to Zero's bridle. Zero wuffled and began to nose the man's pockets for carrots.

“Zero! No!” Heero admonished as he pulled on the rein to stop his horse from accosting the president.

The president chuckled and petted Zero's nose. “He's okay,” the president said. “Sorry boy, I don't have anything on me for you to eat.”

Zero looked a little disappointed and nudged the man, eyes still hopeful.

Patting the gray neck, the president continued to chuckle as he offered his hand to Heero. “Well done, you have quite a horse there.”

“Thank you, sir. I'm sorry for him bothering you, he seems to think that every person is a walking carrot dispenser,” Heero replied as he tried to stop Zero from nosing around the president's pockets again.

The president laughed and moved on to Treize. Placing the red rosette on Goose's bridle, he turned to Treize and shook his hand. “You did your country proud. That was an excellent round of jumping, very close and one to be remembered.”

“Thank you, sir. I'm afraid we were beaten by a better horse on the day,” Treize replied.

“Nothing wrong with that. It's what makes the sport so interesting. Keep up the good work.” The president turned away and then addressed the entire team. “You're all very skilled riders with courageous horses. You're all a credit to this country. Thank you.” With that said, the president went back to the steward and the team made their way back to their place.

“In first place, with a combined score of four penalties and a jump off time of 38:39 seconds; Germany!”

The German team walked forward amid cheers and applause to receive their blue rosettes and the Nations cup itself. The president spoke with each team member as he made the presentation, pausing to pose with Herrman so the photographers could get their pictures as he handed over the cup. Once the formalities were over, the German team returned to their place and the parade began to filter out of the arena.

Once they got outside the Australian team was swamped with people all wanting to congratulate the team, pet the horses and generally pass on good wishes. It took Duo a good five minutes to work his
way through the group to get to Zero and Heero who were surrounded by many admirers. Zero looked right at home amongst all the attention, politely asking for carrots and whickering joyfully when presented with his favorite treat. Heero was looking a little lost, all the attention overwhelming him. He wasn't a social creature by nature, much preferring the peace and quiet to the limelight, but he had no choice but to suffer through it all, it was the least he could do in thanks to the loyal following and support the people had shown himself and the team. To the side Heero could see Zoe, Periwinkle, Treize, Goose, Alex and Duck all caught in a similar situation, although Treize looked right at home amongst all the praise.

Heero spotted a familiar chestnut head working its way through the crowd and he smiled. Moments later Duo was beside him and patting Zero. “Wow! That's some rosette, Heero,” Duo commented when he took in the size and design of the red rosette on Zero's bridle.

“Thanks,” Heero replied.

Duo could see the tension in Heero's face and knew the crowd was bothering him. He quickly came up with a plan to get Heero and his horse away from the well wishers without it looking like they were ignoring them. “I think Noin wants you all to meet back in the stables, something about a press conference.” It wasn't completely a lie, Noin did want to meet with them all for a press conference, only it wasn't for another half an hour yet.

Heero flashed his partner a grateful smile and spoke to the admiring crowd, politely excusing himself and his horse on the pretense of needing to settle the stallion before going to the conference. The crowd parted and let them leave, the rest of the team were quick to follow.

* * *

The press conference had lasted just over an hour, Noin and the team sitting behind a small table while the reporters sat on the other side and fired questions at them all. Heero was not at all comfortable with the conference but accepted it as a part of his being a competitor at international level. Treize had briefed him earlier on what to expect so he was a little prepared. Luckily for Heero, most of the questions were directed towards Treize, the man being the main focus due to his jump off. Heero was asked a few questions which he did his best to reply to honestly and with minimal information. In the sidelines the grooms all waited and watched with various amused smiles on their faces as the team was 'interrogated'.

Finally it was all over and the team was able to make its escape. Noin was presented with a huge bouquet of flowers from the team, a small gesture of their appreciation for all the coach had done for them. She accepted it graciously and managed to keep the tears at bay, although her eyes were watering for some time. Once they left the conference Noin addressed them all again.

"Thank you all for being such great sports and a wonderful team. Tomorrow you will all be leaving and heading back to your usual lives. I wish you all the very best for your futures and I hope I have the chance to work with you all again. Alex, good luck with Fox; Heero, I hope your arm gets better very soon and next time don't keep an injury from me. Zoe, take care of that mare of yours, she's a lovely jumper, and Treize; it's been a pleasure to work with you again, Goose was magnificent in that jump off and I'm proud of you all. Now, the Olympics will be happening in two years and I'm sure you will all be striving towards making the team for that. I have it on good authority that the selection committee will be releasing the names of those it's selected for the short list very shortly. Good luck to you all." Noin left and the group found themselves wandering back to the stables to settle their horses for the night and start to pack up some of their gear in preparation for the trips home on the ‘morrow.

All the gear that Treize would be taking back for Heero was neatly packed away into the trailer, the
remaining gear was stowed into Heero's car, only the basics they would need to get Zero ready to travel in the morning were left in the locker. Once all the gear was packed and Zero made comfortable for the night, Heero and Duo drove back into town for a hot dinner and shower, something they were both looking forward to. Treize and Zechs were a few minutes behind them and the four joined up in the dining room. Zoe and Carol arrived and also joined the table fifteen minutes after Treize and Zechs. Alex and Charlie were leaving that night, Alex wanting to get Firefox home as soon as possible and he didn't have all that far to travel so he'd opted to leave straight away.

The remaining six enjoyed their dinner and swapped stories about their various feelings as they rode the courses, how they felt watching their charges and general gossip. It was a light hearted end to a great few days spent together. Zoe exchanged phone numbers with Treize and Heero, promising to keep in touch and wishing them all the best for the Olympic selection. With dinner finished, the four men made their way to their respective rooms; they were all tired, the past few days starting to catch up on them.

"What time are you planning on leaving tomorrow, Treize?" Heero asked as they paused outside their room door.

"I'm hoping to get away around nine," Treize replied. "What about you?"

"Hopefully around the same."

"You stopping overnight on your way back?"

"No, I'm going to drive straight through. Zero will be turned out for a couple of weeks once we get back, so he should be fine to travel straight home. I'll stop en-route of course for him to stretch his legs and have a bit of a break, we should be home early evening."

"Right. We will probably see you in the morning then."

"Hai. Good night, Treize, Zechs."

"Night, Heero, Duo," Treize replied, Zechs echoing his words.

"Night, guys," Duo said as he followed Heero into their room and closed the door behind him.

As soon as the door closed, Duo flipped the lock into place and stalked across the room to his lover who was removing his boots. Duo's arms went around Heero's waist and he pulled the rider back against his chest, Heero almost falling as he had one foot in the air with the boot almost off. Duo began to feather kisses along Heero's neck while his hands rubbed up and down Heero's torso.

"God, I love you," Duo whispered against the nape of Heero's neck.

"I love you too, Duo; but could you let me get my boots off first?"

Duo chuckled and released Heero. "Want a hand?"

"Please." Heero sat on the bed and offered a foot to Duo who grasped it firmly and began to tug. The boot slipped free and Heero wiggled his toes before presenting Duo with the second foot. Again Duo tugged at the boot, steadily pulling it from Heero's foot when it suddenly slid all the way off, unbalancing Duo and causing him to fall flat on his ass on the floor.

"Ow!" Duo grumbled as he stood up, boot in one hand while the other rubbed his sore backside.

"You okay?" Heero asked, concern deep in his voice.
“I'll be okay.”

“I can kiss it better if you like?”

Duo groaned and felt his groin twitch. “Don't make promises if you don't intend to carry them through,” he replied, his tone husky.

Heero reached out and grabbed his partner, pulling Duo to the bed and rolling partially on top of the vet. Blue sought out violet and locked as Heero's lips gravitated towards Duo's. “I always keep my promises,” he replied and then kissed Duo deeply.

Duo returned the kiss with a passion, he needed Heero, wanted him and demanded him. Tongues sparred until air became vital and the broke apart, each man panting heavily. Rubbing his nose against Heero's, Duo spoke softly. “I've been wanting to kiss you all day.”

“I know. I've been wanting you to.”

“Now that I have you in my bed I'm going to kiss you all over,” Duo murmured, his voice sultry.

“You promised me that if I went clear you would make slow, passionate love to me all night long,” Heero reminded as he pecked at Duo's bottom lip.

“I've never broken a promise yet,” Duo returned, “and I don't intend to start now.” Duo closed his mouth over Heero's, kissing his partner long and deep. The kisses continued and while they did, Duo's hands began to roam over Heero's torso, tugging gently at Heero's shirt until he pulled it free from the waist of Heero's jodhpurs. Fingers slipped underneath and began to feather across the muscled back.

Heero moaned as his skin came alive, nerves tingling and sending jolts of pleasure through his body, eliciting soft sounds from his throat. Breaking the hold Duo's mouth had on his own, Heero began to kiss his way along Duo's jaw to his ear where he nibbled gently on the lobe, knowing it was one of his lover's tender spots. Heero's hands came into play, finding the hem of Duo's T-shirt and pushing it up towards Duo's armpits.

Groaning softly, Duo pushed his awakening groin against Heero's, rubbing their half hard cocks together through the fabric of their pants. The answering moan told him Heero appreciated the action, especially when he thrust up suddenly, as Heero left his tormenting of Duo's ear lobe and zeroed in on a nipple.

"Too many clothes," Duo murmured.

"I agree."

"Then what are we going to do about it?"

Heero chuckled and pulled away from his lover, his erection made more obvious by the tight jodhpurs he wore. "I think we would both be more comfortable if we were naked."

"Best idea I've heard all day."

Heero shifted and began to remove his shirt, his jacket and tie having been taken off earlier. The buttons were quickly undone and the shirt shrugged off. Undoing the button and zip on the jodhpurs, Heero began the task of trying to peel them from his body. They weren't all that easy to remove as they were designed to be tight and form fitting to allow the rider minimal restriction when riding; although the type of riding Heero wanted to do right now didn't require clothing of any sort.
Seeing his partner's skin being slowly bared to his eyes turned Duo on even more and he quickly removed his T-shirt before starting on his slacks. They only took a minute to join the shirt on the floor, boxers following immediately after. Nude, Duo lay back and watched his lover do battle with the tight jodhpurs. He couldn't hold the snicker of amusement as he watched Heero's frustration mounting, the jodhpurs being a little sweaty clung even more desperately to Heero's skin.

"Want a hand?" Duo asked.

Heero sighed. "Yes, please."

Duo shifted, moving gracefully off the bed to grab at one of the legs of the jodhpurs. Taking a firm hold, Duo tugged - and promptly pulled Heero from the bed.

"Ow! Shit! That hurt!" Heero exclaimed as his backside hit the floor.

"Now we're even," Duo snickered.

"Yeah, but I did say I'd kiss yours better. You didn't offer to kiss mine better."

To his credit, Duo didn't choke, he did turn a bright shade of pink though.

"Just teasing," Heero said with a smirk. While he quite enjoyed rimming Duo, he knew the vet wasn't all that keen to try it himself. Heero didn't mind though. The jodhpurs were soon removed with a lot of tugging and grunting on Duo's part and Heero was quick to push his briefs down over his legs. Both naked they embraced again, heated skin meeting as erections were pressed against each other while mouths locked again in a fiery kiss.

Still locked at the lip, Heero managed to push Duo to the bed, half lying on his partner. Reluctantly pulling away from the kiss, Heero began to work his lips and tongue over Duo's throat and across his collar bone, feathering kisses and nips as he awoke a deep passion in both their souls.

"Feels good, Heero," Duo moaned and brought his hands up to thread through unruly chocolate locks, slowly pushing Heero's head down to where he craved the touch the most. Heero refused to be rushed and resisted Duo's attempts to push him towards that thick cock. He would get there eventually, for now he wanted to kiss, nibble and suck on every inch of his lover's body.

Long, slender legs fell open as a mouth explored the ridges and contours of his skin, Duo's moans giving Heero encouragement to continue. Finally reaching the juncture of Duo's thighs, Heero paused and gazed upon the hardened length before him. Duo's cock head was a deep red, precum beaded at the tip adding further evidence to the vet's excited state. Heero's tongue darted out for a quick lick before bypassing the swollen organ and delving below to Duo's sac.

"Ohh, gods, Heero." Duo's head thrashed from side to side, nerves came alive while pleasure sang through his body.

Mouthing Duo's sac for a little longer, Heero moved further down, licking along the sensitive patch of skin behind Duo's balls and eliciting moans of delight from the vet's throat. Between his own thighs, Heero's cock strained, hard and heavy, aching for stimulation. Before Duo knew what had happened, Heero rolled him over and pushed Duo's knees up until he was almost kneeling on the mattress. Hands roamed over creamy buttocks, caressing and teasing. Fingers traced along the cleft, pulling more moans from Duo.

Heero lowered his mouth and pressed a kiss to Duo's right cheek, then his left before pulling Duo's buttocks apart and kissing that sensitive hole. The response was electric. Duo screamed, only remembering at the last minute about paper thin walls of hotels and burying his face in the pillow to
muffle the noise. The last thing they needed was for Treize, Alex or Zoe to be pounding on the door and asking if everything was all right!

With a soft chuckle, Heero noted his partner's attempts to stifle the noise. Lowering his mouth once more, Heero licked along the crevice then teased at the tiny entrance, beneath him Duo squirmed and wriggled with the sensations. Heero toyed with Duo's entrance for a while longer, running his tongue in circles, alternating with long licks and then finally pushing his tongue inside.

Duo thought he'd died and gone to heaven. His body thrummed with sensation, Heero's tongue doing wicked things to him, driving his need to greater heights. Thoroughly enjoying the taste of his long haired lover, Heero continued his ministrations, licking, nipping and sucking Duo's cleft then plunging his tongue in and out, driving the man beneath him wild. Heero's cock began to throb and he knew he needed to find his own release soon. Pulling back a little he was surprised when Duo slipped out from underneath him and quickly flipped them over.

"My turn," Duo purred and then lowered his mouth to Heero's skin, lips and tongue working over the sensitive flesh, exciting Heero even more. Duo worked downwards, found the juncture of Heero's things and began a series of teasing nips to the inside of those thighs. Moans, whimpers and strangled noises of pleasure came from his partner's throat while strong hands did their best to guide Duo's mouth to the leaking cock that begged to be touched. Giving in to his partner's need, Duo licked over the swollen head before taking all of Heero into his mouth and sucking hard.

Heero suddenly found the pillow a vital necessity to stop his screams from worrying their neighbors.

With Heero completely distracted, Duo managed to get the lube from the bed side drawer, flip open the cap and extract some of the gel. Still sucking enthusiastically on Heero's cock, Duo slipped a slick finger between Heero's cheeks and found his target. He circled the tiny entrance, teasing, fleeting touches and then smiled around his mouthful as Heero's thighs opened wider for him. Easing a finger inside, Duo began to massage Heero's passage, stroking the hot inner walls and persuading the muscles to loosen for him.

"Don't stop," Heero groaned, spreading himself wider and earning an amused chuckle from his partner. The vibration hit his cock and sent shivers of delight through Heero.

A second finger joined the first, teasing soft tissues and then scissoring apart, the tight muscles giving to the intrusion. The passage was loosening and Duo was quick to slip a third finger inside. He began to fuck Heero with them, plunging them deep inside and then pulling them out.

Incoherent words began to spill from Heero's lips as his hips thrust up in desperation. Duo's fingers found his prostate and stroked over it, a burst of pleasure tearing through Heero with each touch. Finally he managed to form an intelligent sentence and let his lover know what he wanted in no uncertain terms. "Fuck me now, Duo!" he demanded.

With a soft chuckle, Duo withdrew his fingers, the smile playing over his lips as he took in his partner's flushed state. "If I recall correctly I was going to make slow, passionate love to you all night long," Duo said as he fumbled for the lube again and found it.

"I don't care what you do as long as you hurry up and get inside me. I need you now, Duo," Heero complained.

"So impatient," Duo murmured as he slicked his cock with the lube.

"Not impatient, just frustrated," Heero replied and snaked a hand down to curl around his shaft and pump.
“Hey!” Duo chastised and batted Heero's hand away from his engorged cock. “That's my toy and I didn't say you could play with it.”

“Sharing is caring,” Heero retorted and tried to grasp his cock again, only to have Duo push his hand away and curl possessively around the shaft.

“I'll show you sharing and caring.” Duo muttered and rubbed the head of his cock against Heero's entrance.

“Ahhh. Don't tease, share already,” Heero moaned.

“You want to share?”

A nod.

“Then I'm happy to oblige.” Duo pushed against the slick entrance, the muscles fiercely withstanding his attempt to enter at first and then opening up as Heero relaxed. The anal muscles gave and Duo pushed completely inside, not stopping until his balls pressed against Heero's cheeks. “Hot, tight,” Duo moaned and stilled his advance.

Feeling the thick length invading his sheath, Heero relaxed as much as possible, the initial burn of penetration quickly fading as his channel eagerly welcomed Duo's cock home. After a couple of moments, Heero's impatience began to get the better of him and he began to thrust his hips. Taking the cue, Duo began his withdrawal, sliding a little way out and then plunging back in. He retreated again, a little more this time and increased the length of his strokes as the lube did its job and eased his movement. With Heero's hole now completely relaxed around him, Duo set a rhythm, steady and slow, building up the momentum as the pleasure increased.

The steady slide of Duo's cock against his inner walls awakened the sleeping nerves, bathing them in pure pleasure and causing Heero's mind to take a leave of absence. He became a creature of need, listening only to his body and what it demanded. Hips thrust up, meeting Duo's inner plunge and taking that delicious cock in deeper. Eyes closed, soft whimpers left Heero's mouth as he was completely overwhelmed in sensation. His eyes flew open though as Duo's arms wrapped around his shoulders and he felt himself being pulled up, Duo still deep inside.

Pulling Heero up, Duo had the rider sit in his lap, Heero's thighs falling to either side of Duo's and allowing the vet deeper penetration. “Ride me, Heero.” Duo whispered into Heero's ear and ghosted his hands down Heero's back, stopping at Heero's buttocks and pulling the cheeks slightly apart, Duo's fingers traced along the cleft, teasing at the stretched entrance as his cock continued to slide in and out of Heero's body.

Moans were the only form of vocal emissions left available to Heero; and he moaned loudly. Muscular thighs strained with the effort of riding Duo's cock, the continuous friction to his inner passage driving Heero mad with need. He wanted to come and badly, but without stimulation to his aching cock he was unable to find that release.

Wanting to increase the speed of his thrusts, Duo relented and lay Heero back down on the bed. He paused in his thrusting for a moment to slip one of Heero's legs over his shoulder and then began to pound into his lover. “So good, so hot, so tight,” Duo groaned as his cock was massaged by Heero's strong, inner muscles. Knowing he wasn't going to last much longer himself, Duo reached between their heaving bodies and took a firm grip on Heero's cock. He stroked the organ in countenance to his thrusts, hips snapping repeatedly forward as his hand jerked the rigid length.

It couldn't last forever and reluctantly both parties succumbed to their respective climaxes. Duo fell
first, the heat and tightness ripping away his control, those strong anal muscles milking his seed from him and hungrily sucking it away. Duo's hand continued to pump, albeit on auto pilot and brought Heero to his orgasm seconds after attaining his own. Thick spurts of milky semen shot from Heero's slit to dribble over Duo's hand and land on his belly, the intensity of his climax sending shock waves through Heero and leaving him completely exhausted.

Duo collapsed against Heero, his sweat mingling with semen and the sweat of his lover as his ribs heaved with the effort of drawing oxygen back into his lungs. Beneath him Heero wasn't much better off, panting heavily and trembling from the small after shocks. Soon enough the cool air began to make its presence known and reluctantly Duo raised himself, rolling to the side, his now limp cock slipping from Heero's passage with a squelching sound. Heero sighed as he felt the departure and accompanying trickle of wetness that trickled along his cleft. He rolled over and nuzzled Duo's neck.

“I think we both need a shower, Heero,” Duo stated and wrinkled his nose.

“Agreed,” Heero replied as the smell of sweat, horse, leather and sex hit his nostrils.

“Care to join me?” Duo asked as he wriggled off the bed and stood with his hand outstretched towards Heero.

“I'd love to.” Heero took the offered hand and allowed Duo to pull him from the rumpled bed. Together they made their way into the small bathroom where Duo proceeded to turn on the faucet and wait for the water to warm up.

“It's going to be a little cramped,” Duo said as he eyed the tiny shower recess.

“I'm sure we will manage,” Heero replied with a smile.

Returning the smile, Duo slipped into the shower pulling Heero after him. It was cramped, but they made do, taking it in turns to soap each other up and stand under the spray. It was lucky the hotel had a good hot water supply.

Having cleaned each other off and enjoyed a little 'jacking off' session as well, the pair turned the water off and stumbled out of the shower. Using the thick, fluffy towels to dry themselves, they left the bathroom and tumbled into the other bed, still naked. Wrapping his arms around Heero's waist, Duo kissed along Heero's neck and then feathered his fingers over Heero's stomach and began to trail them through Heero's pubic hair.

Heero groaned. “I don't think I can get it up again, Duo. I'm exhausted, you've worn me out.”

Chuckling lightly, Duo pushed his own half hard cock against Heero's backside. “I did promise to make love to you all night long, Heero. I've not broken a promise yet,” he reminded the dark haired rider.

Closing his eyes and simply letting the pleasure wash over him, Heero wondered if he would ever be able to walk properly in the morning.

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tbc...

Authors Note: There will be 2 or 3 more chapters to this fic before it finishes. There will be a third fic in this arc and given the way my muse is plotting right now, I'd say it will start to be written within a couple of weeks of TFO finishing.
The sounds of doors slamming and voices awoke Heero. He rolled over and winced a little at the slight ache in his ass. Eyes blinked open and he found the digits of the alarm clock. Seven am, too early for Heero who wanted to sleep a little longer. He was tired, the exhaustion of the past few days catching up with him now that the adrenaline rush was over. He smiled though when his eyes alighted on the large, red rosette sitting on the cabinet beside the television. Another sight caused the smile to widen further. Duo lay curled in a ball, hair splayed all around him looking for all the world like an innocent child. Heero knew that to be far from the truth.

Duo was no child, the ache in his ass reminded him just how much of a man Duo was. That same ache also refuted the innocent part. Heero's eyes softened with love and he reached out, taking a lock of hair between his fingers and rubbing it gently. Duo had certainly made good on his promise, loving Heero until the early hours of the morning when Heero had all but begged for sleep. If he didn't know any better he'd have sworn Duo had taken something to enhance his stamina!

Violet eyes blinked open, lips curling into a smile as Duo observed his lover staring off into the distance, obviously locked in deep thought. Not wanting to intrude on a private moment, Duo continued to lie there and watch, memorizing his lover's features.

Heero became aware of eyes watching him and drew his gaze back to his partner. "Morning, Duo," Heero said softly and leaned in for a gentle kiss.

"Mmmm. Morning, Heero." Duo stretched, muscles bunching under creamy skin. "What time is it?"

"A little after seven," Heero replied with a yawn.

"Too early!" Duo ducked back under the covers.

"I agree, but we need to get up and moving, Duo. We still have stuff to pack and a long drive ahead of us."

Duo gave a groan, one that was slightly muffled due to his head being under the covers.

"Come on, we need a shower and to get as much packed up before breakfast as we can."

A shower actually sounded good to Duo. His skin itched a bit, mainly from the bodily fluids that had been shared the previous evening. "Okay, I hear you." Duo emerged from his cocoon with a wide yawn and another stretch.

Fetching clean boxers from the duffle bag, Heero headed for the shower, Duo still persuading his body to leave the warmth of the bed. Heero wasn't long in the shower, returning after several minutes to find Duo sitting on the edge of the bed tying off his hair which he'd just brushed and braided.

"Shower's free," Heero said as he donned a pair of jeans and found a still clean T-shirt at the bottom of the bag.

"Thanks," Duo replied and grabbed clean underwear.

While Duo was in the shower, Heero finished dressing and then began to pack all their stuff away into their respective bags. All that remained was the toiletries in the bathroom. Duo stepped out of the
bathroom and began to dress whilst Heero gathered all their toiletries and popped them into the bags as well. With Duo now dressed, the pair left their room and headed for the hotel dining room.

Zechs and Treize were sitting at a table, obviously almost finished with their breakfast when Heero and Duo arrived. Fetching themselves a hearty breakfast from the buffet laid out, Heero and Duo sat down with Treize and Zechs to eat their meal.

"Zoe sends all her best and hopes to see you again soon," Treize said, relaying the woman's message.

"She's already left?" Heero asked.

"Yeah. She went about an hour ago, wanted to get on the road before the peak hour traffic."

"Can't say I blame her," Heero replied. "By the time we're all loaded up and ready to go the worst of it should be over."

"One can always live in hope," Duo added. "I swear the drivers around here have to be the worst I've ever seen. No respect at all for other road users."

"Too true. I'd better be going." Zechs stood up and smiled at everyone. "I'm back on duty tonight so I'd best be going now if I want to unpack before going to work."

"I'll come and see you off," Treize said softly.

Heero smiled. "We will see you later then, Zechs. Drive carefully."

"Thanks. I'll see you soon, Heero."

"Take it easy, Zechs. I'll give you a call." Duo gave his colleague a nod.

"Will do. You guys have a safe trip back too." Zechs left the room with Treize in tow.

* * *

"I think that's the last of it," Duo said as he observed the crammed state of Henrietta's trunk. "I've left Zero's floating boots out and there's only the water bucket left to go in."

"Thanks," Heero replied as he shoved a sack with hay in it on top of the gear already jammed inside the car. "I'll just tie his haynet up in the front of the float and then we can fetch Zero and load him on." Heero looked at his watch, it was eight-fifty.

Duo walked around to the back of the horse float and lowered the tail gate, Heero emerged from the front and picking up the floating boots, the pair walked back to the stable block to fetch the stallion. Everywhere around them other people were similarly engaged, cleaning out lockers or stables, loading gear and preparing horses for their trips back to wherever they came from. Zero whinnied when he spotted his master, he knew something was up by all the activity going on. The stallion hoped he was going home. He'd enjoyed his few days away, the love of jumping burning through his veins, but he was more than ready to head back to the green paddocks, his lovely mare and son and tell them all about his adventures.

Only Goose, Zero and Duck remained in the stable block, Joe getting his two ready for departure. Heero led the gray out and tied him up, Duo fetching the water bucket and emptying it while Heero put on Zero's floating boots. Treize turned up and helped Joe to finish off the mini pony, all three equines finally ready for the long haul home. Goose and Duck walked calmly into Treize's goose
neck float, Zero didn't give any trouble either, stepping inside Heero's float and allowing Heero to tie him up while he tried to eat the hay in the net and covering Heero with a generous amount of it. Duo put up the tail gate, sliding the bolts home and then snickered at the sight of his lover emerging with bits of hay stuck in his hair and clothing.

"All set?" Treize asked as he and Joe put up the ramp to the goose neck.

"Hai."

"Drive carefully and I'll give you a call later tonight to make sure you got back okay," Treize said.

"Have a safe trip too, Treize," Heero replied. "I've got your cell number if anything should happen on the way home."

"Likewise, Heero. Take care."

"See you later, Treize. Take care, Joe," Duo called out as he got into the passenger side of Heero's car.

"Catch you, Duo. It's been fun 'grooming' with you," Joe replied with a smile and a wave.

Heero climbed into the driver's side and turned the key. Henrietta fired up, Heero slipped the car into gear and began to pull out of the parking area.

* * *

The drive home was long and tedious, Duo navigating through the streets of Sydney and getting Heero back out and onto the country highway with as little stress as possible. Despite the later morning hour, the traffic was still heavy. Duo wondered what the hell it was like during peak hour if this was supposed to be the quieter time! Heero drove for some time, stopping at a small road house around two in the afternoon so Zero could have a break and stretch his legs. Duo bought them both a belated lunch and they sat outside in the sunshine to eat, Heero holding the end of Zero's lead rope so the stallion could graze a bit while they took a rest.

After spending an hour lazing around, Heero loaded Zero back onto the float and Duo took over driving for a while. Heero was tired and knew he could trust the vet behind the wheel so he curled up as much as he could in the seat and dozed off. Duo smiled softly when he spotted Heero's sleeping form. The past few days had been fun and exciting, but it would be nice to return home to their friends and the familiar routine of the practice.

Hilde had only called a couple of times, mainly to see how they were getting on and to reassure Duo that his practice was still up and running. Duo didn't doubt it for a minute. Hilde was a competent vet, Catherine more than capable of running the reception area and the clients all liked them too. Idly his mind switched to Quatre and Trowa. He snickered with the memory of the last time the pair had looked after the horses for them. Little Shini had asserted his 'masculinity' by nipping Trowa. He wondered if the pair would still be in one piece after looking after the horses for several days.

One could always hope.

Trowa hadn't said much when they'd called to check on things, but Trowa was a naturally quiet person anyway. That was one trait that made his job at the animal shelter easier. Animals, especially those that were mistreated, hurt and injured responded better to a calm, quite person. Trowa fit that description perfectly, no wonder he was good at what he did. Trowa had informed them that both horses were fine, eating well and behaving. Duo had had to take Trowa's word for it, he just hoped there weren't going to be any further bruises or injuries to either Trowa or Quatre.
The miles rolled by, Heero continued to doze while Duo listened to the soft sounds of music on the radio. The sun began to creep lower over the horizon when Heero decided to call for another rest stop. Zero needed to be taken off the float again and stretch his legs. Heero needed to pee and Duo's stomach was beginning to rumble - loudly.

Scanning the road map, Heero noted another road house about five kilometers ahead and the pair decided to pull in there, refuel both the car and themselves as well as give Zero a break. Zero was eager to get off the float and stretch his cramped muscles. He didn't mind standing in the smallish space, swaying gently as the float rumbled along. His master was a careful driver, always taking corners slowly and braking well ahead of time so Zero didn't lose his footing. The fresh air smelt sweet after the confines of the float and Zero snuffed the air with delight.

Duo fetched the water bucket from the back of the car and located a tap. With the bucket filled, Duo carried it back and set it down so Zero could drink. The stallion took a good few swallows before gazing around again, water dribbling from between his lips as he took in the sights and scents of his surroundings. While Heero tended to his horse, Duo went inside the road house to buy some dinner. A couple of steak sandwiches and coffees would hit the spot. Having paid for the purchases, the lady behind the counter informed him there was a small yard around the back of the road house that they could pop Zero into if they liked while they ate their dinner. Duo thanked the woman and went to pass on the information to Heero whilst the woman cooked their steaks.

Zero was quite happy with the yard. It wasn't all that large, but it hadn't been used in a while and there was a smattering of grass around, grass that Zero eagerly began to chew at. Securing the gate, Heero left his horse to enjoy a bit of grazing in peace and returned with Duo to sit inside the road house cafe and enjoy their dinner.

Having enjoyed their meal, Duo picked up a couple of coffees and some snacks for on the road while Heero fetched the stallion and loaded him back into the float. Once more they were on their way, Heero calculated it would be around seven when they finally reached Duo's practice.

Soon the scenery began to change, more familiar roads were traveled along as they drew closer to home. Heero was looking forward to getting back. He'd missed Scythe and Shini, the routine of the practice and the familiar scents of Duo's cottage. He missed their friends too and made a note to get something to give to Quatre and Trowa for looking after his horses for him. It had been fun and exciting, an experience Heero had thoroughly enjoyed, but it was nice to come home too.

"Nearly there," Duo murmured quietly as he gave Heero a soft smile.

"Hai. I hope Shini and Scythe have behaved themselves."

"I'm sure they have. I hope Hilde and Catherine managed to cope okay with the practice."

"Knowing those two they have probably got the whole practice reorganized and running to a schedule," Heero snickered.

"Crap," Duo moaned.

"Women have a thing about organization. You'll probably find the entire surgery has been given a complete makeover whilst you've been gone." Heero couldn't help but tease.

"I wouldn't put it past them either," Duo snorted. "I'll be lucky if I can find anything again after leaving those two on their own."

The town of Salsbury appeared ahead, Heero taking the side roads and skirting around the small
town. It wasn't long before they were turning down the familiar road to Duo's practice. Inside the float, Zero could scent the familiar smells of home and neighed. Heero smiled softly while Duo's eyes lit up at the prospect of being home again and sleeping in his own bed. Not that he'd minded sleeping in the hotel; the bed had been quite comfortable. No, it was the other things Duo had missed, such as being able to cuddle and kiss Heero whenever he wanted. Having to keep his voice low too when enjoying a little 'fun' hadn't been easy either. Now they were home again he could be as demonstrative and as vocal as he liked. The driveway to the practice appeared ahead and Heero indicated, slowing the car down and making a gentle turn. They drove slowly along the drive, dusk settling around them. The lights to the surgery were on and Duo could see a few cars in the parking lot. It seemed that Hilde was finishing off evening consults. Up ahead the lights in the stable block were also on, Heero figured that Quatre and Trowa must have left them on to make it easier for them when they got back.

Heero pulled into the parking area at the back of Duo's house beside the stable block and turned the engine off. "We're home," he said quietly.

* * *

Treize turned the goose neck into the long drive and slowly drove up it to the stable area. He could see Otto waiting for him and smiled to himself. Bringing the goose neck to a stop, Treize cut the engine and released his seat belt, Joe doing the same. It was six in the evening Treize noted. He'd made pretty good time. Otto came over as Treize opened the door and climbed out.

"Congratulations, sir," Otto said as he moved to lower the side ramp and unload the horses.

"Thank you, Otto. It would have been nice to have finished first, but I'm not disappointed with the way Goose performed. We were beaten by a better horse on the day," Treize replied.

Otto smiled, he knew how tough it could be in competition, the closeness of the results at times and that's what made the sport such an interesting one. With the ramp lowered, Otto untied Goose and led the stallion from the float and into his stable. Joe followed behind with Duck. The two grooms settled the horses, made sure they were comfortable and eating the feeds ready for them before returning to the float to unload the gear.

Treize unloaded all his personal stuff, piling it beside the cab to take up to the house then turned to fetch some of the horse gear to take into the tack room. Between the three of them it didn't take long to unload the goose neck, the only gear remaining inside belonging to Heero. With his horse settled, Treize bid Otto and Joe good night and picked up his bags, heading for the house, a hot meal and shower.

Jenny had left his dinner in the oven for him, Treize's mouth watering with the tantalizing smell and he was quick to fetch it. Placing the plate on the table that Jenny had kindly left set for him, Treize fetched a glass of red wine and sat down to eat. He'd only stopped once on the way home to refuel and grab a couple of sandwiches for himself and Joe. Needless to say his stomach was grumbling at the lack of food. Once dinner was taken care of, Treize refilled his glass, put some classical music on and went through to his study to place the red rosette with the others he'd accumulated over his career. Elegant fingers caressed the stem of the wine glass as Treize's eyes roamed over the many rosettes, trophies and cups he'd won. He'd been lucky, lucky to have good horses to ride, lucky to have the skills he possessed and lucky to have made his hobby his career.

With the smile still on his lips, Treize headed for the bathroom and a long soak in the tub.

Reclining back in the large lounge chair, silk robe about his body, refilled glass in his hand and the soft music in the background, Treize was content. Well, he would be even more content if his partner
were here with him. At that thought, the doorbell rang and Treize glanced at the clock; it was ten-thirty. He got up and went to open the door, he already had a good idea of who he would find on the other side.

"I hope it's not too late?" the blonde vet asked as he gave his partner a warm smile.

"Never," Treize replied as he opened the door wider to admit his lover. "I was just enjoying a glass of wine before retiring for the evening. Would you care to join me?"

"In a glass of wine or the bed?"

"Both."

Zechs shivered at the prospect.

They lay entwined on the cool sheets, pale skin a contrast to the slightly darker skin of the ginger haired man. Wine glasses remained on the side table, half full and forgotten for the moment. Long, slender legs wrapped themselves around a trim waist, hips pushing up as the body above thrust forward embedding the thick shaft deeper into the compliant sheath. Zechs groaned as his prostate was massaged.

Fingers carded through ginger hair, blue eyes locked as lips gravitated and melded together. Soft moans escaped as bodies thrust lazily against one another, each taking and giving as the pleasure mounted. Treize worked a hand between their sweating skin and curled around the stiff length of Zechs; he began to stroke.

Hearts thudded in chests, blood pounded inside veins whilst nerves came alive. The extra stimulus to Zechs' cock drove the vet to higher planes and he knew he wasn't going to last much longer. His lover's cock brushed his prostate again and Zechs cried out. Heavy balls drew close and with another stroke to his shaft, Zechs found his climax, spurts of semen exiting his slit and coating Treize's hand and his own belly as he rode the tide of euphoria.

With his lover's fall, Treize was soon to follow. The muscular contractions of Zechs' passage around his shaft encouraged Treize to let go and plunge into the abyss. Another thrust and Treize pushed himself as deep as he could, holding himself on trembling limbs as the waves of orgasm crashed over him. His seed was milked from him by the ripples of Zechs' passage, coaxing Treize's cock to give up all it had and satisfy the greedy body he was buried in.

Treize fell against his lover, chests heaving and hearts beating erratically as they allowed themselves to be completely engulfed in the pleasure that only making love can give. Zechs enfolded Treize in his arms, pulling them closer together and enjoying the afterglow.

As the pleasure began to recede, logic kicked back in and Treize rolled to the side, Zechs following and snuggling close again. Still locked together they fell asleep in each others arms.

* * *

Heero unloaded Zero while Duo went ahead to open the stallion's stable door and check to see if Zero's feed was in his feed bin. Scythe and Shini both hung over their stable doors giving soft snorts and grunts as they recognized the nice human's footsteps and scent.

"Hey, guys," Duo greeted as he stepped inside the stable area and went straight to Zero's stable. The feed sat in the feed bin awaiting Zero, along with a healthy dose of carrots. Duo chuckled to himself and then proceeded to the feed shed where he grabbed a few more carrots and fed them to Scythe and Shini.
Heero entered with the gray and immediately neighs and whinnies were exchanged. Scythe blowing softly through her nostrils as the handsome stallion was placed in his stable. Shini gave little squeals as he greeted his sire, eager to learn all about where his father had been.

"I think they're happy to see each other," Heero chuckled as he exited Zero's stable, lead rope and floating boots in his hands.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Duo replied, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. With a smile he turned to go back to the car and commence unpacking.

With Zero safely in his stable, Heero gave his boyfriend a hand to unload the car, taking the many items through to the tack room and dumping them in a pile on the floor. The bridles and saddle were hung up, but Heero insisted they leave the rest of the stuff until the following day when he would go through it all and put it away where it belonged. They were both tired from their long journey and Heero wanted nothing more than to have something to eat, take a shower and spend some serious cuddle time with Duo on the couch. He glanced at his watch; seven-ten.

"Come on, Duo. We can leave the rest until tomorrow. Let's grab our duffels and head inside. I don't know about you but I'm tired, hungry and could do with a shower."

"Right with you, Heero," Duo replied and grabbed their bags from the car, tossing Heero's to him and shouldering his own. "Guess I'd better do some washing tomorrow."

"Might be advisable," Heero returned. "I think my bag is starting to take on the distinct smell of sweaty socks."

"Phew! I agree with you there, Heero," Duo snickered as he waved his hand in front of his nose. "You want to be careful, the way that bag is starting to smell it might grow legs and walk off."

Heero simply shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Actually, I was thinking about putting the really dirty stuff into the wash tonight and leaving it to soak."

"And give Gertrude a bad case of blocked pipes?"

"Duo, Gertrude is a washing machine, she's meant to handle things like this," Heero deadpanned.

"Well, don't blame me if all you find in the morning is a pile of melted washing machine bits."

"I give up," Heero muttered and stood to the side for Duo to open the door to the house.

Duo snickered as he slid the key into the lock and then felt around for the light switch. He flipped it on and nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Surprise!"

"Whoa! Shit!" Duo yelled and dropped his bag in shock.

"What the fuck?" Heero shot around Duo as he heard the vet's yell, all ready to protect his lover against whatever was threatening him. He stopped dead in his tracks and blinked.

Strung across the kitchen was a banner that read 'Welcome home and congratulations!!' Heero blinked again.

"Welcome home, guys!" Hilde bounded forward and enveloped first Duo then Heero in a bear hug. "It's good to see you both again, and well done, Heero!"
The pair shook their heads as they took in the kitchen. Besides the banner there were streamers and balloons festooned around, the table was laden with food and all around them stood their friends. Hilde, Catherine, Trowa and Quatre all beamed back at them. One by one they took Hilde's lead and congratulated Heero on his success, Duo was similarly congratulated for playing the part of 'support crew' so efficiently. To say the pair were stunned would be an understatement. Heero was completely floored by the welcome, he'd had no idea he was this well liked and respected. Sure he knew he had good friends, but just how deep that friendship ran was brought home to him with startling clarity. He felt humbled to know these people and the depth of their caring for himself and Duo.

Duo was similarly stunned. Oh, he knew he had excellent friends and to know they had accepted Heero just as much as himself only made his heart warm. The pair weren't given any time to think though as they were dragged inside, duffles taken from them and loaded plates of food placed into their hands. Everyone was talking at once, all wanting to know everything about the trip, the event and Zero's success.

Trowa smiled when Duo related their stay at Albert's farm to him and he promised Duo he would contact the pair and pay them a well overdue visit. Quatre was in hysterics with Heero's tale of Goose and his refusing to jump without Duck present. When Heero related what the judge had said to Alex during the presentation about riding Duck, Duo thought Quatre was about to asphyxiate!

Hilde wanted all the details on Firefox's injury while Catherine seemed more concerned about Joe and his sprained ankle. When the truth came out about Heero re-injuring his arm he was assailed by two worried females and one anxious inspector while a certain boyfriend and calm animal shelter owner watched from the side lines with amused smiles on their respective faces.

Having finally managed to withdraw from all attempts to 'check him out', Heero glared at his lover for not helping him. Duo had just laughed and told him he'd gotten what he deserved.

The merry making settled down a bit after that and Trowa filled them in on how the horses had been while they were away. Nothing major had happened which settled Heero's mind a lot, although Quatre did let it slip that Trowa had had another slight altercation with Shini. The colt had decided that Trowa wasn't as experienced as his master and tried to drag Trowa off towards a particularly nice looking patch of grass one day when Trowa had been bringing him in for his dinner. Trowa had dug in his heels and hauled the wayward colt back, chastising him softly for his behavior.

Heero chuckled at that. He knew the extent of Trowa's reprimanding an animal. The man would have done it in a calm, quiet tone, one that Shini would have completely ignored. Quatre continued with the tale, Shini had tried again, Trowa had pulled him up and growled softly at him and given the colt a smack. *More like a slightly strong pat*, Heero had thought. Shini had promptly turned his head and given Trowa a sharp nip on the upper arm and that caused Trowa to finally do something.

"You should have seen him," Quatre said, trying to hold his laughter and failing. "I'd just come around the side with Scythe when Shini nipped. Next thing all you could hear was this yell of pain and then a really loud whack as Trowa gave Shini a good, hard smack; and the language..."

"Language?" Duo snickered. "Do tell."

"It wasn't that bad," huffed Trowa.

"Oh no?" Quatre raised an eyebrow. "I repeat: 'Don't you dare bite me again, you fucking animal, or I'll sink my own teeth into you so hard you'll think you've been attacked by a predator. How dare you bite me, you good for nothing fucking piece of dog food!' I swear that's what he said," Quatre stated and sat back, ignoring the glare that Trowa shot him.
"Ohhh, Tro, lost his cool," Duo teased.

"I had every right to," Trowa replied with his nose in the air. "Damn colt drew blood."

"Well, I'm glad to see you stood up for yourself and put him in his place, Trowa; about time," Heero sniggered. "I'll bet he's been the perfect gentleman since."

"Hasn't put a hoof out of place."

"Good. I did tell you he would try things on and the only way to make him behave and respect you is to let him know you're the boss."

"I will be sure to make a note of that for future reference," Trowa replied dryly.

The conversation changed and Hilde had them all in stitches as she recounted some of the cases she'd dealt with during their absence. Heero was laughing so hard when Hilde told them about the pink and gray galah [1] that had come in to have its beak clipped and managed to wiggle free from its owner while Hilde was fetching the beak clippers, that Duo thought Heero was going to have a seizure. The laughter only increased when Hilde continued, telling them that the consulting room door wasn't shut properly and the bird had managed to fly out and into the reception area. From there it had flown back into the waiting room where a couple of other clients were waiting, both with cats.

The galah had landed on the floor and both cat owners were doing their best to keep their pets from squirming free to catch the errant bird. Meanwhile Catherine had joined Hilde and the owner in trying to catch the bird. The galah didn't make the job any easier though when he started to call to the cats.

"We were, all three of us, trying to herd this bird into a corner where I could throw a blanket over it when the damn thing starts calling 'Here, puss, puss, puss,' I just about fell over when I heard that!" Hilde said as she giggled away.

"Did you manage to catch him?" Duo asked as he fought his own laughter.

"Eventually," Hilde replied.

"That has to be one of the funniest things I've heard in ages," Heero snickered. "Here, puss, puss, puss, indeed!"

"I swear, it's true. The bird did say that," Hilde chuckled.

They continued to swap stories until Quatre began to yawn. "I think we should all head off home now and leave these two in peace," he said. "I'm sure they have a lot of unpacking to do and they must be tired after driving all day."

"I agree," Catherine said. "We'll just clean up and then be on our way."

With six people cleaning up, the kitchen was restored to its usual tidy state within no time. Catherine and Hilde took their leave, Trowa and Quatre right behind them. As Trowa was about to get into the car, he turned. "I almost forgot," he began. "The entire town wants to welcome you home and congratulate you on your success, Heero. I believe the mayor has arranged to have a ceremony in your honor in the town square on Sunday."

"What?!"

Trowa smirked. "I'll call you tomorrow and give you all the details."
Heero stood with his mouth gaping as Trowa drove off, Duo equally stunned beside him.

"Well, I'll be," Duo began.

"I never expected..."

"Me either, Heero. Wow."

Heero wrapped his arms around Duo's waist and pulled the vet close. Feathering kisses along Duo's neck he paused at Duo's ear. "If what Trowa's said is true, then you will have to be there with me. I couldn't have done what I did without you."

"Don't forget that big gray, carrot eating lump in the stable too," Duo chuckled.

Heero snickered, his warm breath brushing over Duo's throat. "How could I forget Zero?"

"Mmm. That's nice, Heero," Duo moaned as Heero's tongue began to lick along his ear.

"Want more?"

"Ohhh, yes, please."

"Then come to bed and let me kiss, lick and nibble every inch of your skin," Heero coaxed, his voice husky.

"Ahhh. I think I can do that. On one condition though."

"And that would be?" Heero asked as he moved his mouth to Duo's neck.

"I don't have to keep quiet."

Heero chuckled. "No need to hold back now, Duo. There's only the four walls to hear us."

"Then what are we waiting for? I have the urge to scream." Smiling at his lover, Duo led them both back into the house and shut the bedroom door behind them.

~ * ~

to be concluded...

[1] Galah: the pink and gray galah is a type of cockatoo that is native to Australia. They make great pets and are easily taught to talk.
For more information go here: http://www.amonline.net.au/factSheets/galah.htm
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True to his word, Trowa called the following day and gave Heero the basic run down on what the mayor had planned. He also said the mayor's office would be calling with the complete details of the ceremony they wished to conduct and to see if it would be okay with Heero.

Heero wasn't all that keen on the public interest in him or his horse, much preferring to remain in the safety of obscurity, but he did concede that the people of the town did deserve something from him, after all, they had stood by Duo and himself after the incident with Relena and he owed them something for the support they'd freely given.

The mayor's office called and Heero discussed their proposition with them. He had to admit, it didn't sound all that bad. He relayed the message to Duo, explaining that they simply wanted to have a sort of ceremony in the town square, just to welcome him back and congratulate him on his success followed by a luncheon afterwards in the council chambers with Heero as the guest of honor.

Duo was excited about the entire affair and told Heero in no uncertain terms that he should go, he deserved the recognition after all the effort he'd put in. Heero reluctantly agreed, but informed Duo that once the dinner was over with he intended to leave. He really didn't like big crowds, unless they were at a show of course.

The welcome home ceremony was set for the coming Sunday. It would begin in the town square with a speech from the mayor. Heero would be expected to respond to the speech and once that was over there was to be an hour spent in the square with light refreshments so people could come and pass on their congratulations to Heero. From there it would be a short car ride to the council chambers where a formal luncheon would be partaken of. Once the luncheon was over, they would be free to mingle and then leave.

Heero began to panic as he didn't have anything he termed formal enough to wear. Duo assured Heero that slacks, shirt, tie and jacket would be formal enough and then promptly panicked himself as he suddenly realized he didn't have anything good to wear either. Catherine suggested they go to a suit hire place; Hilde suggested that Heero turn up in his riding attire and Duo in his surgical scrubs; Duo suggested Hilde spend a month cleaning out the dog kennels and doing the next drug stock take.

Hilde offered to pay for the suit hire.

Duo accepted.

***

"I hate this thing, it's too tight," Heero muttered for the tenth time, running his finger around the collar and tugging.

"I'm not exactly all that comfortable myself, Heero. At least you have more experience with wearing shirt and tie," Duo replied.

The pair of them were sitting in the back of a hired limousine, one that had been sent to collect them by the council. They had taken Catherine's advice and hired suits for the occasion, Quatre having accompanied them to the suit hire place and acting as fashion consultant. Quatre did have a fashion sense, even Heero had to admit that, and with Quatre's guidance, they emerged with two suits that
Quatre said 'would knock everyones socks off'.

Duo had to admit they both looked good, Heero especially. The cut of the cloth suited his compact frame, the dark charcoal color adding to the man's brooding looks. Heero similarly thought Duo looked stunning in his suit. A slightly lighter gray than Heero's, the jacket hung perfectly on the vet's wide shoulders, the pants tapering and encasing those long legs just right. It was all Heero could do to stop himself from jumping his boyfriend.

"Nearly there," Duo stated as he watched the town begin to rise ahead of them. "Just remember; no fidgeting, no scratching your groin, no picking your nose and certainly no farting."

"I beg your pardon!?" Heero's blue eyes widened and his mouth gaped in shock.

Duo chuckled and gave Heero a friendly punch to the arm. "I'm just joking, Heero. Seriously, try not to look too bored and don't yawn."

"I'll try to keep all that in mind," Heero replied rather dryly.

"Looks like we're here."

The limo began to slow down as it approached the town square. The crowd began to thicken and people started cheering and waving.

"Surely they're not all here just to see me?" Heero asked as his eyes widened further.

"Yup. I told you you were a popular guy, Heero. This town hasn't had anything much to celebrate over the years, but now they have something to be proud of, a local hero and they're going to celebrate and cheer you on."

"Well, shit!"

"Please don't."

Heero shook his head. Was there no end to his lover's sense of humor?

"You got your speech?"

"Err..." Heero did a quick pat down of his pockets, heart racing for a moment and then he located the piece of paper. "Hai. I have it right here."

"Good. Now, relax, kick back and enjoy yourself. This shin-dig is for you and you've earned it." Duo leaned across and straightened Heero's shirt collar and tie.

"Thanks."

The limo pulled to a stop and the chauffeur got out, stepping to the back of the car and opening the door for Heero and Duo. The rider and vet climbed out, Heero dazzled for a moment as the flashbulbs went off around them. The mayor greeted them both and led them along the path that had been roped off and to the stage.

Heero didn't remember much of what happened. The ceremony was brief, the mayor thanking everyone for turning out to greet Heero and giving a small speech relating to Heero and his rise to success. Heero wondered where he'd gotten the information from and gave Duo a suspicious look. Duo gazed innocently back at him. Congratulations were offered, the mayor again paying tribute to the hard work Heero had put in to get so far.
Once the mayor's speech had finished and the cheers from the crowd quieted, Heero took the center stage and began his speech. It was short, concise and to the point. Thanking the people for their support and well wishes. He also paid tribute to Duo, the vet whom without the dedicated attention he'd paid to Heero's horse wouldn't have seen them where they were today. He thanked the mayor for his kind words and then finished by stating his next goal would be the Olympics and he hoped the people would still be behind him and support him in his endeavor to attain that goal.

Once more the cheers and clapping were loud and long. With the 'formal' part of the ceremony over with, Heero and Duo mingled amongst the crowd, chatting with different people. Heero was repeatedly asked for his autograph and showered with gifts for himself and Zero. One little girl shyly gave Heero a picture she'd drawn of Zero. Heero was touched. Most of the gifts were for Zero though and Heero soon found himself with his arms full of carrots, apples and sugar cubes.

"Need a hand with that lot?" Duo chuckled as he sidled alongside Heero.

"If you don't mind," Heero sighed.

Duo produced a couple of plastic bags from somewhere and Heero gratefully dropped the gifts into the bags, only to have his arms filled again within another ten minutes. Eventually the mayor called a halt to the proceedings and with a wave of good-bye to the crowd, Heero and Duo got into the limo once again and headed for the council chambers and the luncheon.

The food was nice, the décor simple and service excellent. Heero, despite his misgivings, enjoyed himself. He chatted amicably with several of the councilors, Duo doing the same and before he knew it, the luncheon was winding down. The time had passed quickly and with several handshakes, Duo and Heero departed, the limo taking them back to Duo's practice and dropping them off.

Watching the limo disappear, both men turned to the house and Duo unlocked the door, letting them both inside and dumping the bags of goodies onto the floor. Removing his jacket, Duo draped it across the back of a kitchen chair and toed off his shoes. The tie was next to be removed and the shirt buttons undone.

"That feels much better," Duo commented and picked up the bags, placing them on the table and emptying out the contents. "I think you're gonna have to ration this lot," Duo snickered as he eyed the various treats.

Heero stared at the pile of goodies. "I think you're right," he replied. "What the hell is that?" Heero poked at a suspicious looking item.

"Oh, that? The girl that gave it to me said it was an apple and carrot pie she'd baked especially for Zero."

"Doesn't look like a pie to me."

"It got a bit squashed by the looks of it. I'd say it ended up in the bottom of the bag with the apples on top of it," Duo replied as he poked the flattened mass.

"Hn. I'm not too sure I want Zero to have that."

"Must admit, I'd be a bit wary myself."

"Fuck! Have you seen the number of sugar cubes? If Zero eats all those he'll be a diabetic!"

"Good thing he doesn't like sugar then," Duo chuckled.
"But Scythe does."

"Point noted."

"I'd say give the sugar to Scythe, only not all at once, we don't need her bouncing off the paddock fences on a sugar high."

Duo laughed at the mental image of Scythe 'pinging' off the paddock fences. "I agree. Just a couple a day would be plenty for her."

"Zero can have the carrots and apples rationed too."

"There's certainly a lot of them."

"Hai. I think it would be best to cut the apples up and put in his feed, that way we won't get all slobbered on when he eats them."

"I like your way of thinking."

The pair soon had all the treats sorted out. Apples in one pile, carrots and sugar cubes in another two piles.

"I'll take them down to the feed shed after. Right now I need to get out of this monkey suit." Heero stood and went through to the bedroom to change, Duo remained in the kitchen and put the kettle on to boil.

* * *

Over the course of the next few weeks, life at the Maxwell Veterinary Practice began to return to normal. Duo gave Hilde a few days off in thanks for her running the practice whilst they had been in Sydney. Catherine also scored a few days vacation, Heero taking over the reception area as he wasn't allowed to return to Treize's for two weeks under doctor's orders.

Duo had made an appointment for Heero to see Sally Po, Duo's doctor, and get his arm checked out. The doctor had sent him for x-rays and an ultra sound scan, comparing them with the original films from before and after Heero's fall. It was as the medic assumed. The strain and jarring had caused a pin inside Heero's arm to move a little. Not enough to cause any problem with the bone healing, but enough to bruise the tissues around it and cause Heero discomfort.

Sally had ordered two weeks rest from riding and insisted Heero take the time to let his injured arm heal otherwise she wouldn't give him the medical certificate clearance he needed to be able to compete in shows.

Heero hadn't been happy, but conceded the point.

Once his arm had healed up and Sally had given him the necessary paperwork to declare him fit to ride and compete again, Heero wasted no time in getting back into things. Zero was turned out to enjoy a couple of months well earned rest and this gave Heero the chance to start work on Shini again. The colt hadn't forgotten much, Heero giving him a refresher course and pleased with the way Shini responded. After a few days he was able to get on the colt's back again and began the task of teaching the youngster the basic aids for walk and halt.

Duo was back in the familiar routine of the practice, sharing the shifts and surgery with Hilde. Alex had called and let him know that Firefox had made a full recovery and would be back out competing again once the new season started. Duo was very pleased to hear that and passed the news on to Zechs.
The client database had increased and Duo was very pleased to see his bank account growing at a steady rate. With the way the funds were multiplying, Duo began to lay plans to expand the surgery and discussed the purchase of new equipment with Heero.

A much longed for ultrasound machine was purchased, the x-ray equipment updated and even Nrobbuts was given an upgrade, not that Duo particularly cared much for the demonic computer. Both Catherine and Heero insisted the upgraded version was even easier to use and Duo was reluctantly persuaded to give it a try.

It still ate the files.

Duo was tempted to give it a power surge and fry its circuits. Instead he settled on rechristening it 'Natas nwaps'.

When Heero and Catherine had scratched their heads and looked completely stumped, Duo explained. "Natas nwaps: Satan spawn." He then promptly left the reception area vowing never to touch the evil thing again unless it was with the humane killer.

* * *

Heero returned to work at Treize's stable. There were several more youngsters ready to begin their careers and Heero found himself with three new horses to school. A big brown called Altron, another chestnut, Aries and a bay called Lionheart or Leo for short. Leo and Altron showed potential for being good international prospects while Aries had the capability of becoming a top speed horse.

Treize was still working Goose and bringing on the big bay he'd purchased a little while ago. Treize had finally named the three year old; Romefeller, or Romeo for short. Heero thought it suited the rangy bay as he certainly liked the ladies!

Finishing work a little earlier than usual one day, Heero returned home to find Duo sitting in the lounge room looking totally bored. It was Duo's day off and he'd cleaned the house, done the washing, mowed the lawn and then run out of things to occupy himself with. Heero suggested they go for a ride.

"It's lovely out here, Heero," Duo stated as they walked side by side down a bush track. Scythe plodded happily beneath him and Duo relaxed into the swinging gait.

"It's peaceful," Heero replied, his reins loose, Zero stretching his neck out and walking quietly.

The sounds of birds accompanied them, the sunlight filtering through the canopy of leaves as the shaded track continued on. Picking up his reins, Heero urged Zero into a trot, Duo following along. The track widened out into a long stretch of sand, Zero snorted, Scythe tossed her head and pulled gently on the reins.

"Want to go for a gallop?" Heero asked as he held the gray in check.

"What do you think?" Duo replied, a teasing smile on his lips. "I'll race you!" Giving Scythe her head, Duo urged the mare forward.

Scythe needed no second invite, she leapt forward, legs stretching out and eating up the ground, tail streaming out behind her as she flattened out and gathered speed.

"Hey!" Heero shouted, annoyed at himself for being caught off guard. "We're not going to let them get away with that, Zero," Heero stated and shortened his reins a touch, turning Zero fully onto the track and then giving the stallion his head.
With a snort, Zero was off, gray legs pistoning as his body leveled out. Zero could see the mare's tail ahead of him and he stretched even further, pushing his body to the limit and enjoying the gallop.

Duo didn't dare take a look over his shoulder, he could hear the pounding of hooves coming up behind him and knew Zero was gaining. Crouching closer to Scythe's neck, Duo urged the mare on. "Come on, Scythe. That's it, girl. Don't let them beat us!"

Nosri1s flaring, Scythe laid her ears flat against her head and put on a spurt, pulling ahead of the gray again.

"Go, Zero. You can catch them," Heero encouraged his horse, pushing the stallion on with his seat and legs.

A blur of black and gray flashed along the sandy track, two large gum trees ahead marking the finish line and each horse determined to get their nose past the trees first. Neck and neck they tore along, muscles straining, ribs heaving while legs continued to propel them forward.

"Atta girl, Scythe!"

"Come on, Zero!"

The gum trees passed in a blur of color, Scythe's nose just ahead of Zero's. Laughing loudly the two men began to slow the reluctant animals down, gradually bringing them back to a canter, trot and finally a walk. Duo patted Scythe's sweaty neck enthusiastically.

"Good, girl. You enjoyed that, didn't you?"

Scythe tossed her head.

Heero was also patting and praising the gray. "Next time, Zero. We'll beat them next time."

Zero grunted and did a few dancing steps.

Turning the horses, they began the ride home, walking peacefully and letting the horses cool off. Returning to the stables, Duo felt much more relaxed and in a happier mood. There was something about going for a ride, enjoying the feeling of a powerful animal beneath you, the wind in your face and sun on your back that managed to dispel any ill feelings or boredom. Having unsaddled and brushed the two horses down, they put them back in the paddock and returned to the house for a drink. While Heero rummaged in the 'fridge for a couple of sodas, Duo fetched the mail from the surgery. Flipping through he paused and took another look at the white envelope.

It was addressed to Heero and carried the E.F.A. logo in the top corner. Duo wondered idly what it could be. Reentering the house, Duo dropped the mail to the kitchen table and took the offered can of soda. He sat down and passed Heero his mail. "There's an official looking letter in there for you, Heero," Duo said as he opened the first of five of his own mail.

"Thanks." Curious, Heero thumbed through the letters until he found the one Duo had mentioned. He turned it over and peered at it. He couldn't make out anything through the envelope and so began to tear it open.

Duo was too occupied with his own mail to notice Heero's reaction to the letter he was reading. A soft gasp had him soon looking up though.

"Oh, god. I don't believe it," Heero whispered, his eyes widening.
“What, Heero? What's wrong?” Duo was becoming concerned, especially when he saw a tear track down Heero's cheek.

Heero looked up, suddenly aware that Duo was speaking to him. Another tear escaped, then another and another until Heero was crying uncontrollably.

“What is it?” Duo was really concerned now and scraping his chair back, he was quickly beside Heero, pulling the man close to him and trying his best to soothe the rider.

Heero pulled away a little and turned so he could see Duo's face. “I've been selected; I'm on the short list for the Olympic team.”

Duo froze, Heero's words echoing in his head as he registered their meaning. At last he managed to find his vocal chords and turned his gaze fully on his lover. “You have?”

Heero nodded.

Tears of joy fell from Duo's eyes as he hugged his boyfriend. “Heero. That's wonderful news! Congratulations. I'm so proud of you.” Locating Heero's lips, Duo proceeded to kiss the rider senseless, their tears of happiness mingling.

* * *

Heero lay on his back staring at the ceiling. Duo's head was pillowed on his chest, one of Heero's arms around the vet's shoulders. Soft snoring came from the vet's mouth as he slept causing Heero to smile. Idly, Heero's mind wandered as he waited for sleep to claim him.

The news of his selection to the Olympic short list had been celebrated in style at Duo's insistence. Once they're both recovered from the initial shock, Duo had gotten on the 'phone, calling Trowa, Quatre and Hilde to tell them the good news. Their friends were over the moon for Heero, all giving their congratulations and sincere best wishes. By the time Duo had finished the arrangements had been made to meet up at a fancy restaurant in Salsbury called The Lobster Pot. Quatre had taken charge and informed everyone he would book a table for seven thirty. That would give Duo enough time to finish evening consults and get to the restaurant.

Once their friends had been informed of the good news, Heero rang Treize to let him know. Treize had only just brought his own mail in and was busy checking through when Heero called. Immediately Treize scanned through his own mail and found an official letter amongst the pile of envelopes. He'd opened it while Heero was still on the 'phone and gave his own exclamation of joy when he read that he'd also been selected for the short list.

Arrangements were quickly made to change the dinner reservations to add Treize and Zechs to the table.

Dinner had been a huge success, good food, great wine and excellent service. When the staff of the restaurant had found out the reason for the celebration, they insisted on presenting the table with a bottle of champagne. While Treize didn't live in Salsbury, Heero did and he was their local hero. They intended to celebrate with their local star.

Another smile found Heero's lips. After dinner they had all gone their separate ways, Duo driving as he'd only had half a glass of champagne whilst Heero had enjoyed a full one plus a couple of glasses of wine too. After arriving home, Heero had gone to check on the horses and secure the stable block for the evening. Duo went inside the house and made them both a hot chocolate.

Sitting together on the couch, they snuggled while watching a movie. Kisses were exchanged and
the cuddling turned into friendly groping. They made it to the bedroom and continued in their pleasuring of each other, Duo's fingers roaming every inch of Heero's body and bringing nerves alive.

When Duo had entered him, Heero thought his world was about to explode. It was slow, gentle and torturous. Their movements were languid, no need for rushing, the rhythm slow and steady. Duo intended to take his time, to show his partner just how much he loved and adored Heero. Heero was quite happy to let the vet have his way. The pleasure had built slowly but steadily, driving them both wild with need and desire and when they had finally come, it had been mind blowing.

A soft grunt came from the man currently using him as a teddy bear and Heero nuzzled the top of Duo's head, placing a gentle kiss to the crown as Duo settled again. His life had certainly taken a sharp turn the day he'd met Duo and once again he thanked any god that happened to be listening that he'd taken Zero to that show several years ago.

Since meeting Duo, Heero's life had changed; for the better. He was content, happy, safe and secure. Everything he'd ever wanted, he had. A successful career, financial security and the man he loved more than life itself. It had been his dream to ride for his country and he'd managed to take the first step with Zero competing in the Nations cup.

Now he was getting the chance to reach his ultimate goal.

And he had a chestnut haired vet by the name of Doctor Duo Maxwell to thank.

Life wasn't good...

It was perfect.

~ Owari ~

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