Caveat

by tb_ll57

Summary

'How many Preventers does it take to capture a punk teenager?'
'No, it's fine, it's just,' Maxwell said, 'I'm just severely uncomfortable, with you, you know, here in my apartment.'

Zechs levelled a flat look on the younger man. 'Are you.'

'Seriously, you don't feel like this protection detail crap is total bullshit?' Maxwell pulled a bottle of beer from atop the fridge and sat on a barstool. 'She's not even my ex. She's Heero's ex, and I used to have to sleep in the car when they were in here fucking around, because the walls here are like paper, man. You really don't think being assigned to protect your sister's ex-boyfriend's ex-roommate is, like, demeaning?'

'Talking to me about Relena's sexual habits is demeaning.' There were only so many doors to check behind. A hall closet. A bath. The two bedrooms. The apartment was, at least, far cleaner than Zechs had expected it to be. Two cereal bowls in the sink, but otherwise freshly scrubbed and well-maintained. Even the beds were made. 'Which room was Yuy's?'

'The one with my computer junk in it now.' Maxwell shed his scarf to a hook conveniently placed at head-height behind him and went down the line of buttons on his peacoat. 'I've already been through this place. Forensics has already been through this place. Heero even came back and scowled at the corners. No-one found anything.'

Zechs went so far as the balcony, peeling back a vertical blind. The Preventers in the dark car on the street below were in position, blocking the back alley and watching for intruders. Zechs left them to it. He paused to investigate a creaky floorboard under the area rug, but was satisfied there had been no outside interference. 'What did Forensics find on your computer.'

'Nothing. Except all my private shit. I don't appreciate that, either, having to spread open my life just because Heero or your pretty pink princess sister or whoever did something to piss someone off. I had private shit on those drives. Some tech is getting his rocks off on my collection of private shit.' Maxwell swigged his beer, his narrowed eyes following Zechs' every move with suspicion. 'Why'd they send you? Isn't there some nobody cadet or something who usually gets the short straw?'

'Your straw, however short, is not at issue here.' He did some corner-scowling of his own. There truly did not appear to be any disturbance. Yuy's flat had been a much more involved search; just going through the dirty laundry had taken three techs. Zechs was grudgingly impressed at Maxwell's housekeeping. The furniture was hardwood and invulnerable to easy bugging, the rugs were thin enough to show wiring but thick enough to muffle the carry of their conversation, all the lights were recessed bulbs with no spare space for camera lenses. The walls were a buff shade that would be difficult to industrially replicate and yet showed every small ding and scratch, making it easy to spot signs that someone-- anyone-- had been where they were not supposed to be. There were no cabinets in the kitchen, only shelves, and the refrigerator stood out from the wall where it could be easily examined. Even the segregated rooms offered a series of hide-outs with good visibility and clear access to exits. It was a well-thought-out shelter. 'The threats Relena received were quite clear. All three of you are being watched until we've apprehended--'

'Some sick loon. Look, can I just ask, are we going to do this every time someone yells “boo” at your sister? Is there like a seven year deadline on when I will officially have not been around her long enough that I'm safe from being barricaded in my apartment by Preventers?'
'Dinner,' Zechs said. 'Don't use the stove. Microwave only. Unheated would be better.'

Maxwell's jaw was clenched hard. He jumped off his stool and marched five steps around the bar to his kitchen. He returned with a can. He slapped it down to the table with a loud clang.

'What's that?'

'Beets,' Maxwell answered. 'Dig in.'

They managed four hours of peace-- interrupted only by rumbling bellies-- before Maxwell made a magnanimous, if reluctant, overture.

'You can sleep in Heero's old room,' he told Zechs. 'Assuming you don't mind what they used to do on that bed.'

'Thank you,' Zechs replied mechanically, because it took a second to register yet another insult. 'I won't be sleeping.'

'How does being tired protect me?'

'Another agent will take over at 0530.'

'Well I can tell you've thought of everything.' Maxwell set a folded sheet set on the couch. 'In case you change your mind.'

'Thank you.'

'Has anyone considered the fact that if you don't catch this guy you could end out guarding me forever?'

'If it goes on longer than a week we'll most certainly concentrate resources on Relena.'

'Snap.' Maxwell seemed amused. 'That was pretty good, Merquise.'

He hadn't meant that as a joke. But, examining it retrospectively, he saw how it might sound like one. 'I won't disturb your sleep.'

'You can at least unbutton. I won't tell your superiors if you pee on duty or something.' Maxwell pulled his elastic from his short ponytail and fluffed his hair. 'You know what's most annoying about this? They were a bad couple. Epic bad. And it's still haunting me.'

'I never approved, either.' He occupied himself in examining a Joan Miró lithograph framed in the hall. 'They were neither of them mature enough for a relationship so intense.'

'Right?' Maxwell perched on the edge of the couch. 'Fate of the world meets burgeoning political career meets high expectations. I don't know what's worse, that he thought they'd be getting married or that she thought they wouldn't.'

'Wait-- Relena thought--' 

'You didn't know that?' Maxwell wore a crooked grin. 'You don't give either of them enough credit. She knew he'd be a crap husband. He knew he should try.' He picked up his shoes. 'I'm off. If I don't hear you sneaking out, I guess I'll see you when you catch the guy.'

'Good night,' Zechs answered courteously, but it was lost in the snick of a closing door.
'In here,' Maxwell called. 'There's take-away on the counter.'

Greek gyros and thick-cut potatoes and rice. There was bottled sparkling beside it. Zechs fixed a plate for himself and wandered to the balcony windows with a sour cucumber to munch. 'Where are you?' he asked absently. The Preventers in the car below gave him the nod, and he twisted the blinds to shut out the alley below.

'Bedroom.' Propped up by pillows on his bed, thumbs flying over the small keypad of a mobile phone. Maxwell didn't look up at his entrance. 'How's it going?'

'No progress since this morning.'

'Yeah, the day shift told me. You've got an IP address.' Maxwell flipped his phone, scrolling pages only visible to him. 'The day shift guys are hacks, total hacks. Choudhury spilled coffee all over my desktop.'

'I've seen your shop. There are many unexpected noises in a mechanical garage. He was just startled.'

'You wouldn't have spilled. Just saying.'

Zechs took that as cautiously flattering. 'You're locked in for the night. If you need anything outside, tell me, and I'll have it taken care of.'

Maxwell finally abandoned his phone, tossing it carelessly to a bedside table. 'What do I have “outside” anymore? Your guys take my mail, frighten away the neighbour's cat, bring me crappy food from secure sources. I'm officially living in a bubble. I have no outside needs.'

'They gave you your phone back,' Zechs said.

'With instructions not to contact anyone. Big whoop.'

Zechs gazed silently at him for a moment, deciding for himself how much of that was ritualised complaining and how much was a dangerous mood close to boiling over. He settled on whining. Maxwell was not a child any more and he knew better than to act rashly. 'Come eat,' Zechs told him. 'I'll show you the case notes.'

That got a spark of interest. 'Is that allowed?'

'Does it sweeten the pot if it's not?'

'Hell yeah.' Maxwell swung his legs off the bed. 'Lead the way, Wind.'

The case notes were hardly extensive; what they didn't know far outweighed what they did. But Maxwell gave all of it serious attention, absentmindedly nibbling on slices of lamb as he read. 'Who's guarding Relena?' Maxwell asked finally. He lifted a page to show Zechs. 'Who's Spider and Orange? By the way, Orange? Agent Orange? Preventers are really scraping the barrel for code names.'

'They're Sanqians, extremely loyal to my sister,' Zechs finished his rice with a final forkful. 'And
'Yes. We are, rather. Although, oddly, Orange fits him. He's solid as an ox. I've watched him ram down iron doors with just his fist. Relena is in good hands.'

'What about Heero?'

'He refused personal protection. He's watched, but from outside his home.'

'Wait, I could've refused? You didn't tell me I could refuse.'

'It must have slipped my mind,' Zechs said mildly. 'Imagine that.'

Maxwell scowled at him. Then, grudgingly, he laughed. 'You're funnier than I thought you would be. I guess Heero's protection enough for himself. You know he shoots first and asks what later, though.'

'Why did he move out? Heero.'

'The usual reasons. They already interviewed us both. I just read our interviews.'

'I'm asking for anything that's not in the file. An IP address is thin.'

For a moment, their fingers tapped the bar in unison. 'This doesn't go in the file,' Maxwell answered finally. 'I mean it. I ever find out you let it leave this space, I hack your entire life.'

'Threatening a Preventer is felony interference.' He stood to remove their plates to the sink. 'If it's not relevant, it doesn't matter to the case. Tell me or not. I'll honour your decision.'

'No you won't. You talk a good game, but you're not completely above manipulation on the sly. The war may not be relevant to the current conversation, but I did learn from it.'

It had almost been comfortable between them. So much for that. Zechs had been about to resume his seat. Instead, he stood against the stove, arms crossed over his chest. 'Fair enough,' he replied. 'Old habits are deeply engrained in all of us. I'm used to the cocky attitude you rebels throw around to hide your inadequacies.'

Maxwell almost fell for that. His eyebrows slammed together and he just barely bit back a hot retort. Zechs smiled tightly at him.

Then Maxwell burst into a genuine grin. 'Okay,' he said. 'Choudhury didn't manage that as well, either.' He offered a hand. 'Truce.'

Zechs shook it immediately, but as soon as their hands touched, he had to wonder if it was a smart idea. Truces meant nothing more than a close of hostilities-- not a promise not to play. And if Maxwell had one defining trait, it was a deep, insatiable need to find buttons to press.

'You were going to tell me about Heero,' he reminded Maxwell. He took his stool again, deliberately adopting a more casual pose, to suggest their 'truce' had reduced the other tensions in their forced companionship. He propped an elbow on the bar, crumbled a scrap of pita onto a paper towel. The look he turned on Maxwell was his most innocent-- a trick he'd learnt from Noin and found invaluable on dozens of occasions. He played it almost indifferently, as if he didn't really care if Maxwell answered.

Maxwell was not a weary Academy Instructor, however, and he was not fooled. 'Was I,' he said. 'I meant it, though. This doesn't go in the file. Any file.'
'I give my word.'

'And I'm only telling you because you and Heero had that weird whateverness you had. I guess the war is relevant to this conversation, after all.'

Ah. It followed Maxwell would know about that. Or rather, those: the several times he and a boy he'd known only as Zero-One had tried to battle each other out of the atmosphere. Duelling to the death. 'Weird whateverness may be the most accurate description,' he admitted, and picked at that pita for real now, picking over his memories. 'I admired him. In the kind of way that makes you want to destroy what you admire, immolate it. Rise victorious over it.'

'I don't know if Heero ever knew what he felt about you. Which is kind of to the point. Heero--'

Maxwell blew out a breath from pursed lips. He stole a corner of bread, shredding it slowly with his fingernails. 'He was drugged out of his mind, the day we launched for Earth. Completely fucking high.'

'What?' Whatever revelation he'd expected, it wasn't that. 'High?'

'Dekim Barton, the men he paid to work on the Gundam Project, they had a lot of theories about their pilots, and how to manage us. Me, I got lucky; Professor took a shine to me and didn't let them get away with much. Well, he let me get away with a lot, is the other way to look at it. Let me get away with my Gundam and-- anyway. Heero. They had Heero for years, you got to understand that. And if you're building a super-soldier you obviously spend some time thinking about how to stop him from doing anything but exactly what you want him to do. For Heero, it was drugs.'

That cast everything he'd ever known about Yuy into a completely new light. Bad enough Yuy's relative youth; Zechs had been that young when he'd gone to war, and age had been the last of his considerations. He'd always assumed Yuy's self-abnegation was a function of his extreme fanaticism, an expression of total dedication to a goal. But if there had truly been no choice-- 'He self-destructed his Gundam,' Zechs said.

'Nine June. There were whole weeks that went by that year and I didn't know what day it was, but I remember that one like crystal. I still have nightmares about it.' Maxwell screwed his mouth to the side. 'So anyway. Boom, big boom, and Heero's in a coma for a month. Not injecting, not swallowing anything on schedule. When he woke up, he was clean. It was all out of his system. Flip side of that was that he didn't have a fucking clue where he was or why,'

And not quite a month after that he had lured Yuy to the Barclay Base in Antarctica. Their duel had had all the brutal potential of mutual annihilation. Interrupted by his sister's unexpected arrival. They hadn't fought again until November, each driven by the ZERO System. They'd been evenly matched then, and he'd believed Yuy had held back, as he had, until they'd reached a mutual decision to halt. They'd met one final time on Christmas Eve, battling for control of Libra, control of the future. He'd assumed-- he'd always assumed Yuy was as committed, as utterly present and alive in those moments as he had been.

Maxwell read his silence. 'Don't go imagining the worst. He had a functioning brain and he decided what he wanted to do all by himself, after that. My point is that he did it on the back of a major chemical shift. He'd literally been programmed to follow orders. Even if he'd never got off their junk, it would have been a hard year, you know? He just really struggled to make it all make sense. He still sort of does, all these years later. He does better when there's someone with him who helps him work it out. For a while it was Trowa, but Trowa and Quatre, you know, so that was out. Hence me. Me slash Relena. I think sometimes he still sort of needs permission, you know. Like if there's someone nodding along he feels better, surer about everything. Anyway.'
It was a lot to reconcile. Zechs didn't like how it made him feel. And that was without even trying to make it fit with their current circumstances; no way of discerning if this news had any effect on the stalker threatening the three of them.

'He moved out,' he ventured. 'Six months ago.'

'It's a big step for him. A really good step. Give Heero credit, he never hesitates about a big risk.' With a shrug, Maxwell tilted his head back to swallow a handful of crumbs. 'Credit for Relena too. She helped him decorate the new place. I'll tell you one thing, I'm glad that frickin' dog is gone. Beagles are not meant for apartments.'

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He got the alert at three-twenty that morning. He read it twice to be sure, and went to wake Maxwell.

'We've made an arrest,' he said, as Maxwell propped himself up on a fist and gazed sleepily at him. 'The grandson of Relena's driver.'

Maxwell blinked at him a few times, then rubbed his eyes. 'The kid with the spots and inappropriate tattoos?'

There was a picture attached to the file. Zechs referenced it. Maxwell's description was apt. 'Yes.'

'How many Preventers does it take to capture a punk teenager?' Maxwell dropped back onto his pillow, then sighed deeply and sat up. 'So you're leaving? Detail over?'

So it would seem. 'I'll let myself out.'

'No, it's cool.' There was a wide swath of skin, accidentally revealed, before Maxwell fumbled on the robe at the foot of his bed. Zechs politely looked at the wall. 'Sorry. You want like a cuppa or something? It's-- really fucking early.'

He checked his phone again. They wouldn't need him at HQ for the interview-- that would be Orange and Spider for the win, and they wouldn't want him interfering. The car guard below would have had the same message he did, and they had probably already cleared out. There was no-one waiting at home, certainly, and he didn't need to check in until nine. 'That would be welcome,' he decided finally. 'Thank you for thinking of it. I can make it, though, if you want to go back to bed.'

'Up now. No problem.' A face-splitting yawn contradicted that, but Maxwell was indeed up and moving. He bypassed Zechs with a warm slide, leaving a bedsheet scent behind him. Zechs followed at a courteous distance. 'You hungry?' Maxwell asked over his shoulder. 'I could eat.'

'You just waked.'

'I can always eat.' An impressive amount of food was coming out of the refrigerator as Zechs arrived at the bar. Eggs, chives, a packet of rocket greens, soft cheese. The coffee pot, already prepared, came on with the tap of a button, and soon began to hiss busily.

'Here,' Maxwell said, and put a small cutting board and knife before him. 'Quarter-inch lengths.' He placed the chives very precisely on the board. 'So. The kid.'
'Yes.' Zechs dragged a stool to his spot and sat. The chives were ready washed, wrapped in a damp paper towel in the bag. He selected the thickest green straw and measured a careful quarter inch. 'They caught him outside the embassy, using an outdated pass and claiming he was supposed to be my sister's driver tomorrow. Today. When agents questioned him, he caved and admitted everything.'

'He's pretty young, right?' Maxwell was a defter hand than he. The eggs tapped once on the counter and broke over a bowl without so much as an eye in their direction; in fact the other hand was busy with the milk bag, and ready to splash it, unmeasured, into the mix. A twist of pepper and a pinch of dried herbs followed and were whisked briskly. 'You ready with those chives?'

He'd only finished four. 'How many do you want? He's young, yes. Well-- not much younger than you. Nineteen.'

Maxwell gave him a sleepy-eyed smirk. 'Here. Like this.' He bundled several stalks of greens together. Zechs reddened-- he hadn't thought of that. 'Keep the point of the knife on the board and just move the chives, not the blade. Like a little log being sliced up at the mill.'

That was an image he could work with. They nodded in tandem approval when he managed the new batch of chives with almost the same speed Maxwell could have. Maxwell swept the chopped bits off the board and added them to his egg batter. 'He wasn't a top suspect though, right? What about the IP address? You guys tracked that yet?'

'Top suspect, no. But he is the one who showed up. They'll run all the rest of the evidence now, once they have the interview.'

'Mm.'

'It does take time, Duo.'

Maxwell glanced up as he lit a burner for his pan. 'Yeah,' he said, a beat off. The pan clunked loudly landing on the burner. 'Get the margarine out of the fridge?'

He rose to obey. 'Anyway. I'm sure they'll return your computers now. Your life will go back to normal. You're free.'

'Free.' The grin was full this time. 'That is a beautiful word. Coffee's up. You take the first cup, you've been up all these hours.'

He only really registered how tired he was when he had the first steaming sip. It warmed him from head to toe in a running river. He sighed deeply before he thought to censor himself, but Maxwell's only response was a bright spontaneous laugh.

The omelette Maxwell produced looked as good as anything he'd ever seen in a restaurant, served on a warmed plate with an artful little arrangement of mustard-spread soldiers and fresh greens. Maxwell joined him on the stools and went through his meal with unhurried contemplation of the movement of his fork. The silence was easy, so Zechs didn't break it except to refill their mugs. When both their plates were empty, he brought them to the sink to wash, and he washed the pan and mixing bowl as well, up-turning them on a drying rack and turning off the coffee maker. It was somewhat after four. He had time for a leisurely shower, maybe a trip to the gym, a luxury he'd missed the last week while on guard duty. He could nap in the car before going in at the office. The full belly would work against the coffee if he didn't keep moving.

'Hey,' Maxwell said suddenly. 'That stuff I told you about Heero. That really freaked you out.'
It caught him by surprise, the only excuse he had for standing still like a deer in headlights. He inclined his head stiffly. 'I won't pretend it hasn't,' he answered.

'Maybe I shouldn't've said anything.'

'I would always rather know than not.' He rubbed at sandy eyes and leant back against the stove. 'I wish I had known then.'

'It's worth remembering that you were actually enemies.'

'That doesn't ease my conscience.'

'It should. No-one's entirely proud of anything they did in the war. If we were, you wouldn't be a Preventer, I wouldn't be hiding out in a garage, Heero could do something useful with himself instead of float a million online study programmes. And we were all tripping our balls off at some point. I tested the Zero system too. I know what it does to you.'

'I don't let Zero take the blame for my actions.'

'Maybe you should.'

It was an effort not to grind his teeth. He could feel heat creeping up his neck. 'You've been talking to my sister.'

'I did occasionally interact with her when she and Heero were done rolling the sheets. She changed my mind on a few things, even. Like you.'

He looked sharply at Maxwell. Maxwell looked placidly back him. 'Did she,' Zechs said.

Whatever reply Maxwell would have made was swallowed into another large yawn. Zechs used the opportunity to break their face-off, to grab his gear from beside the door and button on his coat. When he turned around again, Maxwell's eyebrows were arched high, but he seemed to accept the manoeuvring for what it was, and he didn't look offended, only amused.

'I'll let you get back to sleep,' Zechs told him. 'Thank you for the meal.'

'No problem.'

'I can let you know how the interview goes. When the investigation is over.'

'Really? Yeah. I'd appreciate it.'

Not policy, and not something he'd ever offered before. But it was not the usual sort of investigation, and Maxwell was not the usual sort of protectee. He would have followed up with Yuy and his sister just the same. If they had asked.

'Good night,' Maxwell said. 'Or morning. Either.'

'Yes. And to you.' He hugged the strap of his pack to his shoulder. 'I can see myself out. But you should lock up after me. To be safe.'

'Yeah, okay.' Maxwell padded barefoot the seven or eight steps to the door, opening it for him. Standing that close together, Zechs stared over his head as he shuffled back, far enough to bump into the wall.

'Good night,' he repeated, and ducked out. He pulled the door closed after him, and waited just long
enough to hear the deadbolt slide before striding off for the stairs.
'How's the interview going?' Zechs asked. Tropic passed the creamer and Zechs liberally dosed his coffee. 'Is that him in there?'

'Look for the big smear of grease and hair dye,' Tropic grunted. 'They're down to writing his statement. Should get this wrapped up in time for lunch.'

Zechs ducked down the hall with his steaming cup. There was a small crowd in front of Interrogation 4's two-way mirror; low-voiced conversation ticked up into murmured greetings for him as he joined his fellow agents. Spider was in the room with the kid, walking him through it, glowering over his shoulder as he wrote. Orange appeared to be dozing at the table, but Zechs knew from experience that Orange was taking it all in. Sure enough, when the kid began to argue over something, Orange kicked his chair out from under him-- all without opening his eyes or removing his hands from their comfortable perch on his belly.

The young man himself was not an impressive specimen. Long limp hair in a flat, fake black. A deeply pockmarked face, a slack mouth not expressive of intelligence, and a cringeing hunch-backed posture indicative of a weak will. 'Hard to believe he managed to get us all hopping,' Zechs said.

'Any jackass can hump a phone and creep after a celebrity.' Neptune brushed her dark hair over her shoulder and gave him a sideways smile. 'The other ones okay?'

'I presume.' Maxwell certainly was. Relena-- he had at least thought of calling her-- he wasn't an entirely terrible brother-- but Relena would still be under watch, by her own people if not Preventers, and after a stressful week he'd figured a call would be better timed for the afternoon, not the early morning. 'Did anyone tell Yuy it's over?'

'We stood at the perimeter and shouted,' Mamba grumbled. His partner, Cobra, snorted into her coffee and rolled her eyes exaggeratedly.

'What's the kid's name?' He consulted his file again. 'Árni Olsen. Did he say what his motive was? Why did he even begin this?'

'He's in love.' Neptune gave him another sly smirk. 'Go figure. He must take after the blondes. I know I do.'

He waited a courteous minute between that comment and the careful side-step he made to put Mamba between him and Neptune's flirtations. 'Any mention of why he targeted Maxwell and Yuy, as well?'

'Eliminating his rivals.' That was Tropic, who joined them at a saunter. 'Except Yuy's a recluse and Maxwell was under wraps as soon as we got the threats. The Vice Foreign Minister was really the only one he could get to-- she's the only one who makes public movements. The bid with the fake ID wasn't all that half-baked, actually. We only changed procedure because of the threats, and he may not have anticipated we could do that so quickly.'

'Still, it's clumsier than he's been otherwise. We only got the IP address because Yuy's network was airtight. And if we'd never found him in person we'd never have been able to identify him by the phone threats alone. He used pre-paid mobiles, signal bouncers, digital voice alteration-- that's high-tech and meticulous work. A fake ID is childish. And why didn't he anticipate we'd change
procedures once we were aware of him?'

'He says he learned how to use the mobiles from the net,' Cobra volunteered. 'It's all out there for anyone who wants play-by-play instructions. At the end of the day, he's just a stupid kid. He made a mistake. We got him.'

'Did I hear you were headed back to Mars?' Mamba interrupted.

'Not just yet.' Zechs felt a buzz in his pocket and checked his mobile. 'Going to stay grounded for a while-- the Terraforming Project doesn't need as many of us any more. It's down to the specialists these days.'

'Summoned?' Neptune asked archly.

'Yes.' He tucked it away. 'Enjoy the rest of the show. I'll check in later.'

His message was from Sally Po, and though it wasn't urgent, there wasn't really anything to be gained by avoiding work. He'd have a report of his own to write, for all the arrest hadn't been his. He stopped by his desk long enough to turn on his computer and drop off his files, and headed for the lift to third storey, where the Director and Section Command were stationed. He himself had nearly had an office there. He had, in fact, had to turn it down twice since. His last command had been at the Battle of Libra, and so long as he had the choice, he would never command again. That time of his life was well over. He was content these days to be a cog in a greater machine, albeit a cog with extraordinary latitude and considerable seniority. And a cog who happened to be friends with the Director.

Sally rose from her desk to greet him, stretching out a hand across the considerable paper piles on her desktop. Zechs shook warmly with her and shifted a coat and handbag to the floor at her gesture, sliding down to a comfortable slouch in the chair facing her. 'Social call or something more?' he asked. 'I like the haircut.'

'Do you?' Sally touched the short waves that swept back from her high forehead. 'I was ready for a change, but I'm worried it's too much. Pepper swore it would take ten years off.'

He was at a loss for how to reply to that. 'I like it,' he repeated cautiously. That seemed to satisfy. 'I just wanted to reassure you about Relena,' she said more seriously. 'Olsen never got in sight of her. We tried to keep her as unaware as possible of all the arrangements. She's used to restrictions on her movements, at least. I'm sure Duo gave you hell.'

'He wasn't thrilled,' Zechs admitted.

'I already heard from Hydra. I take it Duo's got a mouth on him. They were pretty terrorised.'

Maxwell had mentioned a certain amount of needling with Choudhury. 'Hydra's a big boy. If he can't handle a little smart talk, he shouldn't be assigned high-level targets.'

Sally raised her eyebrows. 'You don't usually defend bad behaviour.'

'Maxwell's? He was understandably put out with the situation. I didn't find him badly behaved.'

She considered him only for a moment, until he raised his eyebrows back at her. 'Well,' she shrugged then. 'That's good. Duo's a big boy too. He knows we were only doing our jobs. He's never been all that fond of Preventers, but he's never actively made it hard on us.'
'Was there something you needed from me?'

'Yes.' She shifted the files on her desk, and came up with one from the bottom of a pile. 'I'm hoping you can interview the driver. We want to get a history on the grandson. If there's a pattern of behaviour here, our case is that much tighter.'

'You don't want Spider and Orange on it?'

'They're occupied, but more to the point I don't think their good-cop bad-cop routine is right for this. Pargan's an old man, and I don't think he's even raised his voice in a decade--'

'Pargan?' Zechs said sharply. 'Miles Pargan?'

'You know him?'

Yes. His father's major domo. Odd that he had forgotten. Yes, he'd known Pargan was still attached to his sister. It was a miracle they'd never come face to face. 'He's been with the Peacecraft family for many years.'

Sally pressed her lips together. 'You want me to assign it to someone else?'

'No.' He finished his coffee with a final swallow and dropped the cup into Sally's bin. 'No, it's fine.'

'You're allowed to opt out for personal reasons.'

'It's not personal,' he replied calmly. 'I haven't seen him since I was a very young child. I have no real memories of him. It's fine. Actually, the fact that we're connected will probably work to my advantage during the interview. He might be more open.'

'Zechs... I'm not sure. I think maybe I should assign this to someone else. Neptune--'

'Would appall him. He's a gentleman. Neptune is not a lady.' He put out his hand for the file. 'It's fine,' he repeated again, firmly.

Sally didn't protest any further. She gave up the file in good grace, and a supplementary secure drive for recording. 'You hungry?' she asked him then. 'I'm going to go down to the caf for breakfast.'

'No, thanks. Maxwell cooked for me, actually.'

'He did?' she said. Her eyebrows went up again, and Zechs made a point of imitating her until she caught herself at it and covered her forehead with her hand. 'I guess he really was well-behaved,' she laughed. 'You sure he didn't poison you for kicks?'

'No ill effects yet.'

'I am a doctor, if you start to feel symptoms coming on.' She nodded him at the door. 'Job well done, Zechs. We'll wrap this up and call it a success.'

'We will.'

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'Incoming call,' his hands-free receiver announced.

Zechs detached a hand from the steering to tap the device once. 'Number?'

'Unknown.'

He didn't receive many-- any-- calls from numbers he didn't know. And the hands-free was not equipped for a discussion about secure or non-secure lines, which meant he could either answer the call or not, and lose whatever message it might be. 'Accept,' he decided finally, just as the red light began to blink, indicating the call would drop momentarily. 'Merquise,' he said.

'Hey. It's Duo Maxwell.'

He could not have been more surprised by that. 'Hello,' he answered belatedly. He checked his GPS to be sure of his exit. He had six more miles to be inattentive. 'Is something wrong?' he asked. 'Any problems?'

'No, everything's kosher. So listen, I'm--'

'We're finishing up the interviews this morning. If we're lucky, Olsen will take a plea and go straight to prison. Even if we face a trial--'

'Yeah, I'm familiar with the process. Hey, I was wondering--'

'How did you get this number?' he thought to ask. 'I don't give it out.'

'You do, actually. It was on the card you left me the first night. I just never had an emergency.'

There was a long pause after that. Zechs braked carefully behind a slower vehicle. 'Still there?'

'I was waiting for you to interrupt me again.'

Zechs grinned faintly. 'My apologies. Go ahead.'

Maxwell laughed. 'I called to ask you out. I mean, ask you in, I guess. I went kind of crazy on groceries, what with my newfound freedom, but eating a feast alone is kind of demoralising. So...'

It seemed he could be more surprised. 'Ask me out,' he repeated blankly.

'I mean, like, if you wanted. As a-- I-- kind of thought maybe we had a little bit of a thing going. A very little bit. Like maybe we could possibly be friends, in non-protector-protectee situations.'

'Friends.'

'You're kind of just taking the last words I say and saying them back to me. It's hard to tell what you're thinking when you do that.'

He had no idea. 'What I'm thinking,' he began, and Maxwell laughed again. He cleared his throat. 'Dinner. Tonight?'

'Tonight if you're not busy. Any time this week.'

What he could think of was no logical reason not to agree. 'Tonight would be fine,' he said. 'Um, can I bring anything.'

'Only if you want something special to drink. Otherwise it's beer. Guess you know where to find the
place, so. I'll let you get back to your day.'

'Wait-- what time?'

'Oh. Seven? Sevenish? That give you enough time? Flexible on my end.'

'Seven is fine.' He was approaching his exit. He twisted to look behind him, just to be sure, and moved into the right-hand lane. 'I have to go,' he added. 'Interview. I'll-- I'll see you tonight.'

'Yeah. Okay. Well, good-bye.'

'Call terminated,' the receiver informed him serenely.

The flight out of Brussels was just over two hours, but his lag time was considerably shortened thanks to Preventers' resources. He was the sole passenger on the jet that landed at Helsinki's smallest airstrip, little more than a dirt road with a few controllers. He had a driver of his own waiting for him, a young cadet with a smart salute. He crossed the border at half past eleven and at just before noon they entered Sanq's capitol, Kalmar. Sanq was a small kingdom, the product of political bargaining, brief and forgotten alliances, and there had been only two short dynasties before Alliance had brought her low. When Relena married-- not, he was perhaps unduly grateful to know, to Heero Yuy-- she would do what Zechs couldn't, and continue their line. Their duty as Peacecraft heirs.

Sanq didn't need him now, and he didn't feel welcome in his father's kingdom. Time had reconciled it-- mostly. He had never really believed in his core that he would rule here, and he'd been abjectly relieved that Relena had been so readily accepted since her identity had been revealed. For himself... for himself, he'd had two years on Mars to decide he wasn't doomed to exile by anyone but himself. A period of punishment, entirely self-imposed, which in its way had been worse, but still cleansing-- and a period of reflection. And, now, a period of renewal. Zechs Merquise was who he had been most of his life, and Zechs Merquise served him still. And he served, which was all to the good. This way.

It didn't stop a pinched feeling developing deep in his belly when Sanq Palace first came into view.

It was not the palace proper that his driver took him to, however. They curved around the wide coral-laced drive and departed left on what seemed little more than a cowpath, the car jumping in muddy ruts to either side. They ducked through a cramped brick tunnel and popped out the other side into wan, tree-filtered sunlight warming a block of cottages. A bent figure hoeing soil in a little garden plot straightened at their approach.

I don't recognise him, Zechs thought with relief. The white-haired elder who shed his mack and garden gloves was just an old man like any other. The tight clench of his gut eased.

'I'll wait here for you, Agent,' his driver said. Accented English, that curious mix of crisp and blunted Nordic. Not Zechs' accent, not anymore. Not in a very long time.

'Thank you,' Zechs replied. He let himself out, carry bag in hand. His boots squelched on damp gravel.

The old man was waiting, too. Weak eyes, Zechs catalogued that uncertain squint, and arthritis in the swollen fists and bowed legs. No give at all in the craggy face. None.

'Mr Pargan,' Zechs said. He inclined himself at the waist. 'I'm the agent from Preventers. For the interview.'
'And right on time.' Pargan wiped his hands on an old towel and extended one to him. 'Please come in. Tea?'

'Thank you.' A brief dry squeeze. Reassuringly impersonal. 'Forgive the intrusion.'

'Not at all.' Slate stones inset in diamonds made a path to the blue door of the cottage. A modern enough building, done up to a quaint impression of pre-colony Scandinavian. Zechs ducked the low lintel and came up in a bright small space. Blonde wood walls, a merrily burning fireplace, burnished copper pots. Plush chairs arranged around a low slate-topped kitchen table.

On which sat a box. 'My grandson's things,' Pargan said. 'I'd been packing him for university. He was set to go this past September, but he deferred. I suppose now I know why.'

Zechs took the unspoken invitation to open the box, though he refrained from rudely spreading the contents over the table. The usual electronic toys-- a phone Maxwell would have envied, a few bound books-- unusual choice-- a plastic dinosaur. He lifted that, rubbing the pad of his finger over a ridged mane of scales.

'He was a sweet child,' Pargan said abruptly. 'Not many friends. Not many children his age here.'

'You raised him?' Zechs asked. He returned the dinosaur to the box. A medal for scouting service, a hard drive for external storage, a camera. The camera he picked up, thumbing the 'on' switch and calling up the picture files.

'My daughter Bera passed away nine years ago,' Pargan answered. 'His father cared for him for a time, but Latham is a troubled man.'

That fit with the profile they'd created before they'd made their arrest. Absent mother, threatening father. The first few dozen pictures were standard, as far as he could tell. Vacation somewhere. Roller coasters, a castle-- a fairytale European castle, not a grand if rather dull mansion like Sanq Palace. Mascots in costume, groups of young people. School trip, judging by the uniforms.

There. Nestled between a genteel portrait of a water fountain and a haunted ride. A dead rabbit, grotesquely broken, lying beneath a bush. Its bloody nose and glazed eyes spoke of fresh death. Torturing animals. That fit the profile too.

'Do you take your tea with sugar, lemon, or milk?'

'Lemon, thank you.' More pictures, a whole ream, featuring Relena. Relena at the Palace. Relena in the market in town, speaking at the university, touring a factory. No pictures beyond Sanq, but these chronicled almost a full year, by the time stamp. They'd recovered another camera with the boy, but it was useful to know the obsession likely went back years. There were memory cards in the box. Zechs bet they contained more of the like.

'Did you suspect him?' Zechs asked finally. He took the chair he was offered and sipped from the steaming mug Pargan set beside him.

'Not enough to confront him.' Pargan sighed into his own cup, gnarled fingers curled around the blue porcelain. 'I knew he had a shine for her Highness. Not that it was so deep. Relena is loved everywhere she goes. I thought it would pass, when he went to school, saw more of the world.'

'It might have,' Zechs said. And then was cross he'd said it. It was a lie. The boy was a sociopath in the making, and it was lucky he'd been caught and stopped before he'd managed to get to Relena. Nothing short of incarceration would have stopped him. But Pargan's shoulders slumped, and his
hand trembled holding his cup. He'd wanted to hear that.

'Please forgive me,' Pargan said roughly. 'He's all the family I have left. And I've given more time to Relena these past years. I've wondered if I missed something. If my inattention did this to him.'

'It was nothing you did, sir. And to say that Relena didn't need you would be wrong. She needed a father, too.'

A sharp look, then. 'Your compassion does you credit, Agent,' he said. 'You flatter an old man.'

'A good man,' Zechs countered gently. 'In unfortunate circumstances. Preventers will help your grandson. He needs help, sir. And that's the only thing that would ever make a difference.'

Gnarled fingers rubbed at a twisted mouth. Pargan blinked watery eyes and gazed down at his tea. Zechs sipped his own, politely allowing the moment to pass in silence.

'You're very like him,' Pargan told him finally. 'Your father.'

Zechs raised his head. 'You know me, sir?'

'I'm old, Agent. Not blind and deaf.'

Zechs placed his tea carefully on the table. 'Whoever I might have been, I am no longer.'

Pargan sighed. 'Ask me the questions you came to ask. I'll tell you whatever you need to know about my grandson.'

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'Rough day,' Maxwell said, sounding impressed. 'Poor guy. His only grandkid. He always seemed like a good guy. Pargan, I mean. I mean, I didn't ever spend any real time with him-- he just kind of stood by the car sometimes. I don't think he's even been out of Sanq lately. Relena said something about him being ill.'

'He didn't mention.' Zechs was in charge of 'thinly slicing' fennel, an activity that took great concentration and was having mixed results. He did get to eat the mistakes, at least. 'I didn't think he looked particularly well, but given the situation, I assumed it was depression.'

'Open wide.'

Caught off guard, Zechs fumbled it. Maxwell had a funny sort of grin on his face. Zechs managed to swallow the orange slice without dripping too much of it down his chin, and wiped his face hurriedly with his palm.

'Wow,' Maxwell. 'Graceful.'

'Sorry.' He wiped again to be sure. 'You surprised me.'

'Clearly.' Maxwell's kitchen tasks were far more involved, but he moved languidly from cutting board to stove to refrigerator and back to the bar, where Zechs once again sat. 'Here,' he said, and put a crystal glass in front of Zechs. 'Got this special for you.' He produced a bottle and modelled it on his arm. 'It's a South African. I like reds, personally, but you don't drink red against the harissa
stew, and anyway you strike me as a white drinker.’

'Good guess.' The tumblers had an appealing weight to balance the bright, appley flavour of the wine. When he made a noise of approval, Maxwell grinned again and filled the tumbler halfway for him. Zechs sipped again. 'I thought it was going to be just beer.'

'Must mean I like you,' Maxwell said. He smirked as he said it, and Zechs felt free to roll his eyes in response.

'May I ask you a question?'

'You may.' His fennel slices joined griddled auberguine, radicchio, and the rest of the oranges. 'Here, drizzle this honey over that.'

He obeyed. 'You never really seemed upset about the idea of being threatened by this Olsen. Even before we knew it was just a teenager.'

'Point of fact: that was not a question.'

'Pretend that it was.'

'Okay.' Maxwell munched a slice of fennel thoughtfully. 'Guess not. It happens. Will happen again.'

'You don't know that.'

'Please,' Maxwell dismissed him. 'If it's not about Relena it'll be about Gundams. If it's not about Gundams it'll be about something else. People suck.'

'That's a harsh attitude. For someone your age.'

'Call me a cynic, but don't call me naïve. Here, watch this part, it's nifty. This is how you make the roulades. You spread out the ricotta mix-- here, come do this with me. You can use your finger. Very thin layers here because we're going to add the spinach.'

'Why did you invite me?' Zechs asked him.

'Seriously?' Maxwell canted back a step to look up at him. 'You really just asked that.'

'I—' He flushed.

'Chill. I kind of dig the awkward interpersonal skills you've got going.'

'This is a date,' Zechs guessed, awkwardly indeed.

'Seriously?'

He licked ricotta off his finger. His ears were hot. He was glad his hair covered them. 'I didn't realise.'

'So I see.' Maxwell nudged him aside and began to roll the roulades in greaseproof paper. 'It doesn't have to be. Romantical date, I mean. We really can just be friends if you want. Since Heero moved out it's kind of lonely, you know? Plus, you eat what I cook. Heero thinks hamburger is adventurous. But if I can argue in favour of the dating, I'd like to open with the fact that I'm adorable.'

He smiled involuntarily. 'I don't date very much,' he said stiffly. 'I'm not very... familiar with the
process.'

'But you don't object in principle?'

Did he? Not object, exactly. 'Truthfully I'm not sure it's entirely a good idea,' he admitted softly. His own attempt to roll a roulade resulted in a mess, gently rescued by Maxwell's cleverer fingers. 'There's a lot of history on either side of us.'

'They call that “spice”, I believe.' Maxwell tapped him on the wrist. 'If it makes you uncomfortable, then don't. Simple as that. You change your mind, you let me know. Don't take forever about it, but it's not like I've got dance partners buying up my tickets. Meanwhile, see what I'm doing with the greasepaper? Use it to tighten the roll as you go.'

Maybe it was Maxwell's easy dismissal of the tension. He swallowed back the uncomfortable comments he'd been trying to dredge into complete sentences. 'Like this?' was all he let out. He rolled the sponge slowly. For a moment, Maxwell's fingers overlapped his.

Well. That answered for at least one piece of the dating puzzle. He liked the way that felt.

'Good,' Maxwell approved. 'Now we let those set a minute and we enjoy the wine. Tell me about the rest of your day, as friends do.'

'All right,' he agreed. 'That sounds good.'

Maxwell winked at him. 'It does, if I do say so myself.'
'Pedal, you wimp!'

Zechs gritted his teeth and forced the pedals down rapidly. His legs ached, his fists ached from gripping the handlebars, and his ass ached from straddling the very small plastic seat. Maxwell sailed ahead, showing off, his loose hair ruffling in the breeze as he ducked branches and launched a jump off an out-thrust oak root.

'Merquise!' Maxwell called back. 'What happened to the Lightning Count?'

He could cheerfully have ground Maxwell's face into the dirt. 'He's somewhere back at that promise of a light afternoon bike ride,' he shouted.

'This is a light afternoon bike ride.' Maxwell pedalled backward, slowing in place on the path until Zechs caught up to him. Generously, he didn't take off again, as he had the last three times. 'Your legs are too long. You should raise the seat. Pull over, we'll do it before we go any further.'

He added his knees to the list of infirmities as he gingerly dismounted his bicycle. He stripped his helmet and swept the sweat out of his hair with his hand, shaking it off onto a nearby bush. He was soaked through, could feel it trickling down between his shoulderblades and over his stomach. 'I'm not convinced this is fun,' he said.

Maxwell squirted him with water, making him jump. 'Drink up. We can turn around. If you're quitting.'

His competitive nerves were wound tight. He restrained himself with effort. Maxwell was grinning at him, bright and sharp as a cheshire cat. 'Considering that turning around will take three hours, I vote yes,' he returned evenly. 'How much more forward is there?'

'Not too much more. Another seventy kilometres, more or less. The path swings up around Poperinge, under Vlamertinge, wide around downtown Ieper. We'll go through all that farmland between Staden and Houthulst and hook back up with the car at Wijnendale.' Maxwell popped a little wrench from his belt pack and loosened the screws on either side of Zechs' seat. 'Like I said, easy path.'

'You do this often?' He was in good shape-- if not, perhaps, the excellent shape he'd been in as the Lightning Count-- so he wasn't winded for long. But he had grudging admiration for Maxwell, who was admirably slim for someone who liked to cook so much, and who clearly worked at it. His tight suit left muscled legs and arms bare, and fitted just well enough to spots that Zechs was resolutely ignoring. 'It's a good way to see the countryside,' he added, the tamest, albeit lamest thing he could think of.

'Yeah, it is. I did a triathalon last year. Good challenge, nice people. Relena even came out to cheer for me. Here you go, try the seat now.'

Zechs remounted while Maxwell held the handlebars. 'Better,' he decided. 'Less cramped.'

'If you get your own bike we could do this regular. I come out pretty often.' Maxwell let him go, and Zechs eased back to the ground. Without discussing it, they both propped their bikes against a nearby tree and settled on a large flat stone for their break. Maxwell provided foil-wrapped granola bars, and Zechs swapped him for a small ripe clementine. 'Thanks. Yeah, fresh air, communing with nature, et cetera. Basically, though, it gets me out of the apartment. Sometimes I forget to
watch myself and I start hiding indoors, you know. It can be-- well.'

'Can be what?' Zechs asked him. He drank half his water and tucked the bottle into the pouch at the small of his back. 'You don't strike me as someone who prefers his own company.'

'Meaning I'm a talker?' Maxwell grinned at him. 'I guess. I guess I can be. You're a lot like him-- Heero. Two words to every nine of mine. Silence and me, not so much, but I can get locked in my own head, you know. Once you get into a groove with something you can't dig out. So at least on the trails I'm occupied, right? I can be alone without freaking out about it.'

'I don't think it's that you talk. You say important things.' Zechs peeled his clementine slowly, dropping the rind into a pile between his shoes. 'You're very honest in how you speak about yourself, at least.'

'Explaining,' Maxwell shrugged. 'Kind of a habit I got into with Heero. He ignores me if I don't draw him a line between Point A and Point B.'

'Tell me about him.'

He was aware of Maxwell eyeing him. Weighing him, and maybe judging him. 'Guess you get locked in your own head, too,' Maxwell said.

'Sometimes.' He rolled his head on his shoulders. 'Please don't-- feel like I'm only interested in information. That's not why I'm spending time with you.'

'I'm not in doubt about why you spend time with me. You may be in doubt, but I'm not.' Maxwell kicked out his legs and settled back on his elbows, scuffed trainers waving back and forth. 'Heero. Okay. He doesn't like to do this kind of thing. Walking, sometimes, or climbing, but he's actually not all that physical. No, that's not quite right. I think he just associates it with-- what's a good way to say this. Purpose. Some definable need that has to be satisfied. Solved. And he's so fucking good that he's the one who always ends out solving things, but it's not like it's cost-free, you know. Which I really wish you Preventers would get, because they keep bugging him. He's not going to join. He shouldn't have to deal with the question over and over and over again.'

'You have to admit he'd make an impressive addition. He's unmatched.'

'Because he plays total war. Or he did. And like I said, at what cost.'

'You defend him.'

'Damn right I do. But he can say no for himself and so far he has. And damn good on him for doing it.'

Zechs recalled Sally's comment that Maxwell wasn't fond of Preventers. That seemed to be bearing out. 'You don't even think he'd have a place in Tactical?' He sectioned his clementine and chewed slowly. 'There are still threats out there that need his kind of-- creativity. He sees avenues no-one else does. That has value and it's value we need.'

'I don't say this to offend you, but I want you to hear it in the spirit intended. There are things that you can do as a person fighting a juggernaught that you can't do when you're a person inside the fort. You don't need Heero Yuy to come chew his fingernails figuring out how to revolutionise your forces. You need to get out of your own head and take a long hard look at what Preventers really is. You're not the little guy against the big baddies of the universe. You're the big man on campus now.'
His immediate reaction was not kind. Maxwell could talk all he wanted-- he was on the outside and he hadn't extended so much as a pinkie finger-- since the last time that he had. The relatively bloodless end to the Barton War had been a miracle. And like most miracles, it had rested on the intense and, yes, costly effort of those involved. So on second consideration, he gave Maxwell's words real thought. 'I don't know,' he said finally. 'We absolutely had to regularise. There was no way around that, legally, morally. Just in order to function, even.'

'Which is totally fine. But take a step back and recognise what that implies. You don't need Heero.'

'Or you,' he said.

Maxwell only smiled. 'I'm a greaser at heart. I like machines. I like making them work.'

'But you called it hiding,' he recalled. 'That night in your apartment. If you and Heero really were only interested in fading out of the limelight, you wouldn't have stayed in Brussels of all places.'

Maxwell sat up abruptly and smacked him on the thigh. 'Conversation for another date,' he replied. 'Maybe we can save it for a date-date. With alcohol. For now, though, we ride.'

He tried not to feel put off. Only a little. But it was certainly a fair request. Their not-quite-friendship wasn't wide enough to open some doors. Whether they would ever reach that date-date stage, he still wasn't sure. But it was fair to draw the line. He tossed the rest of his orange to the animals in the brush, and offered Maxwell a hand up. 'Forward-ho?'

'If you think you can make it.'

'I think I might survive,' he said dryly. 'As long as you don't try to race me.'

'Wouldn't dream of it,' Maxwell swore virtuously. 'Much.'

**

'New case.' Tropic leant on the wall blocking off Zechs' cubicle. 'Neptune did her best to sink her hooks in, but I pulled rank. You're welcome.'

'Thank you,' Zechs said fervently. 'I'd prefer not to make it an official request.'

'I know.' Tropic dropped the case file on his desk. 'Your copy. You want to do the travel booking or liaise with the locals?'

'You're better at the diplomacy than I am. I'll wrangle the arrangements.' He flipped to the front page. 'Where are we headed?'

'L4. There's sabotage in the minefields. They want us to help pinpoint the leaders and be a visible presence while they beef up security.'

'I'll read up. Thanks.'

'Not a problem, Wind.' Tropic nodded himself out.

L4 meant shuttle tickets and possibly the need to stay at the Embassy, which meant wrangling with the government e-travel system. Preventers had their own fleet, but used it sparingly-- many types
of mobile suits were restricted or under injunction, and shuttles were frankly too expensive for private travel. So he and Tropic would be passengers like any others. Zechs was not particularly recognisable in uniform-- provided he wear a hat-- so that would be safe enough. It took him nearly two hours to complete the booking so that they wouldn't make too circuitous a route from port to port, and then he exhausted another hour searching for hotels. He ended out contacting the Embassy for rooms after all.

He checked the time, and ducked down the hall with his mobile. It was nearly lunch, so he wasn't surprised to be dialled straight to voicemail; Maxwell had already told him he had a full docket this week. He waited for the beep, and left a message. 'I need to cancel this weekend's bike ride,' he said. 'I've been called up to the colonies. It might be a little lengthy-- I hope no more than a week, but possibly two or more if we don't hit any breaks. I apologise for the inconvenience.' He hesitated, but nothing more occurred. 'Good-bye,' he finished, and hung up.

'Hot date?'

Neptune. Rebeka Spry, in the real world, though these days Zechs rarely thought in terms of 'real' versus 'Preventers'. Maxwell would have liked to know; he was nosy about real identities, though Zechs steadfastly refused to reveal any Maxwell hadn't already weaseled out for himself. Still, Neptune's cultivated air of mystery suited her. She had replaced Noin in Preventers' First Unit, and Zechs was uneasily aware that she meant to replace Noin in other ways.

'Not a date,' he said truthfully. 'Just plans between friends.' He tucked his phone away. 'Excuse me, I have to--'

'I know, but I wanted to let you know. Cobra rang me from the road. There's been a problem at Heero Yuy's apartment.'

'Yuy?' he repeated sharply. 'What kind of problem?'

'Apparently he thinks his mail is being tampered with. He contacted Cobra, but they're out of town, too. You have any time to spare for a visit? I thought I'd head out and check in on Yuy.'

That was worth the aggravation. 'Yes,' he decided immediately. 'Let me shut down the desktop. I'll meet you in the carpark.'

Brussels was a city of neighbourhoods. Maxwell's commune, like the one Zechs had chosen for himself, was largely a choice made out of proximity to work, a desire to avoid Brussels' endemic traffic jams and the crumbling metro line as much as possible. But they'd also both been drawn to the communities of expatriots who populated much of the city these days. The new government, fresh as it was, had already had a marked effect on the city it called its seat. When Zechs had returned from Mars he'd been struck by the marked heterogeniety of the people, the accents, the languages spoken. Colonial accents-- the slight lisp of Oners, the often obscure mumble of the Fours, the up-noted Twofer dialect that even Maxwell still had a bit of-- those co-existed now when five years earlier it would have been a remarkable thing to hear even a few voices like that on Earth. On the advice of his fellow Preventers, Zechs had settled in a townhome in Woluwe Saint Pierre, populated largely by Embassy staff and other governmental groups. It had easy access to the highways and the airport and even downtown, handy for a man expected to travel frequently, and a wonderful sports center, also necessary for a man who couldn't plan regular access to good exercise. Maxwell's apartment was in the residential suburb of Watermael-Boitsfort, ideal for-- he was catching on to these things now-- biking and long walks, a green-filled space, a quiet space where people were friendly but not intrusive on each other. But Zechs had been surprised to hear that Yuy had settled in Schaerbeek. It had the international flavour he assumed would appeal to a colonial, but it had a more run-down air than his or Maxwell's neighbourhoods. The art-nouveau
architecture had been crumbling for a century, replaced here and there with unfussy, unlovely blocks of apartments and student studios. Yuy's place was was one of those, a dark grey facade with a small street-facing balcony overlooking a dispirited communal garden plot. Though it was autumn on Earth, there were a number of open windows-- not, he was unsurprised to see, Yuy's. Yuy's balcony doors were covered by what looked like a blanket or heavy curtains, and none of the windows were any different.

They parked on the street and walked a half-block to the steps of Yuy's building. The door was open, unavoidable in shared housing, but Zechs quietly tested all the doors off the enclosed stair, and found them all locked. Yuy's was midway off a small landing and featured none of the detritus outside the other apartments, no bikes, no boxes of recyclables. Zechs knocked once and held up his badge to the eyehole.

Almost immediately he heard the latch. Several latches. Neptune smirked at him. 'Be polite,' Zechs murmured, half admonition, half real worry that she'd openly express her contempt. Paranoid or not, Yuy deserved to be greeted by sober respect, not mocking sarcasm.

The young man who finally appeared on the other side of an evidently well barricaded door was a shock. Not because he was tangibly different from how Zechs remembered, although somehow he was. Still lean and slight, still glowering yet stoic. But now startlingly humanised. He wore cigarette-legged jeans, a loose yellow button-down. A knit cap. Relena's handiwork. He recognised it immediately. The slipped stitches were unmistakable.

'My mail was taken,' Yuy opened. 'So we were given to understand.' Zechs pocked his badge. 'Agent Neptune and I are temporarily replacing Agents Cobra and Mamba.'

'I don't care which ones you are.' Yuy abandoned the door. Zechs exchanged a glance with Neptune, and gestured her through. With a shrug, she entered Yuy's apartment. Zechs followed and closed the door behind him. Five locks. He locked each of them, and set the superfluous chain.

Yuy was at his window, the one overlooking the street. 'You have a license for all that equipment?' Neptune said. Zechs almost rebuked her for joking, but it wasn't entirely funny. That was night-vision telescopic, and the video camera next to it really might have been illegal. The firearms on the table were definitely illegal. Maybe he ought to call Maxwell and let him deal with this.

'I collect my mail daily at the post,' Yuy told them. 'They know me by sight and I'm the only one with permission to collect it. Today there was nothing to pick up.'

Zechs removed a notepad, but didn't write yet. 'You receive mail every day?'

'Yes,' Yuy retorted flatly. 'Duo and I have a system. We send each other something every day to ensure the mail hasn't been tampered with.'

'Great, there's two involved in this,' Neptune muttered. Zechs let that pass, too, because it was in fact good news, if not something he'd known about. Maxwell would have to confirm it, but for the moment it was helpful.

'And the staff of the post reported no internal difficulty that could explain the problem? No strikes, no late trucks?'

'No. They called the office where Duo mailed his letter. They put it in process. It arrived at my post
and was logged in. Then someone else picked it up.' Yuy squinted through his camcorder and turned back. 'I got a description from Gervaas--'

'Who?' Neptune interrupted.

'The post officer, I would guess,' Zechs said. 'Please continue, Mr Yuy.'

Yuy scowled at them. 'White, mid-thirties, blond, well-built. He had a notarised note with my signature claiming I had granted permission for him to handle my mail while I was ill.' He held out a folder. 'I had Gervaas copy the original and seal it. You might get fingerprints or DNA. Here's a copy.'

Zechs opted for a polite thanks. He opened the folder and read the note-- exactly as Yuy had said. If it was a ploy, it was a good touch-- a notarised permission form seemed completely in line with Yuy's standard MO. He passed it to Neptune. 'Provide us with the address and we'll talk to this Gervaas.'

'He's on shift until seven this evening.' Yuy had that ready too, a notecard with precise block printing. 'He's expecting you.'

Neptune threw up her hands. 'Well. We'll get right on that.'

'Mr Yuy. Heero.' Zechs folded the notecard, rubbing his thumb along the perforated edge. 'We'll follow your lead. But I want you to do something for me as well.'

Yuy was immediately suspicious of him. He rocked back physically on his feet, his fists clenching uncertainly.

Zechs linked his hands before him, feet together, the most deliberately non-confrontational pose he could manage in full uniform. 'I'm going to need you to take down the camera. The telescope can stay, but it's not legal to film people without their written consent.'

'Are you serious?' Neptune began. Zechs cut her off with a look.

'I am serious,' he said. 'The camera in exchange for the post office lead. Are we in agreement?'

Yuy chewed his lower lip. 'This is not normal Preventers procedure.'

'No, it's not. This is a private agreement between you and I. If you do agree.'

Maybe it wouldn't have worked without that 'weird whateverness' Maxwell said they had. Yuy knew him in some respect, had some gauge of his seriousness. It was not just a bribe-- Zechs saw the very moment when Yuy understood that. Yuy needed to ensure his own security, as Zechs would in such a situation. As any sane man who had the kind of enemies they had had would need to. Yuy needed to feel safe, and the mail incident was clearly large enough to trigger his anxiety. Zechs understood, and that was enough to slacken the tension in Yuy's bunched shoulders, relax those angry fists.

'I agree,' Yuy said. He took two steps backward, and touched the camera. The red recording light turned off.

Zechs inclined his head. 'Thank you. We'll go to the post right now.'

'Thank you,' Yuy echoed haltingly. 'I... appreciate it.'
Zechs nodded again. He touched Neptune's arm, and moved her toward the door. 'We'll let you know immediately what we learn.' He unlatched the door, and gave Neptune a little push to move her out. He was not surprised that he had no sooner pulled the door closed again when Yuy locked it behind them.

'That is so not the way we do business, Wind,' Neptune warned him. 'That won't fly in the report.'

'I'll take the hit. It was my decision.'

'It's not about taking responsibility. Yuy's in there breaking the law and you just agreed it was okay! How do you know he won't just turn the recorder on again?'

'He won't,' Zechs said firmly. 'I believe his word. Now. The post office.'

'Please,' she dismissed him. The skin around her eyes was tight and her mouth was unhappy. Zechs gave her grudging points for being genuinely upset at the way the interview had gone-- their rules were new still and shouldn't be flouted, perhaps, as easily as he'd just done.

'I know him,' he said. 'Believe in me, at least. His cooperation now is a good thing for later, especially if there is someone taking his mail.'

'I don't know if you recall right this moment, but we already arrested someone for stalking them. This could be completely unrelated. This could be a figment of his imagination, Wind. He didn't look incredibly stable in there.'

'Let's go on the assumption that he is and investigate anyway,' he suggested mildly, but her protests were beginning to wear on him. 'Or did you have anything else to do?'

He felt her glaring at his back as he descended the stairs. But she came after him all the same.

**

'You have a system?' he asked.

'He told you about that, huh? Don't spread it too wide. It took us months to think it up and it's so perfect.'

'Right now, all I'm interested in knowing is if it has flaws.'

'Not in two and a half years. I mail something every day, a letter, a note, a postcard, whatever. I vary it up just in case someone's ever watching for a pattern. He gets my mailing the next day. So the stuff that's missing today is what I mailed yesterday.'

'And it was what?'

'A birthday card.'

'It's his birthday?' Zechs repeated, startled.

'Like hell either of us know when it's our birthday. There was a pack of them on sale a while back. So it's like missing-missing?'
'This Gervaas person swears it was logged in. He never touched it.'

'What about their security camera?'

'Broken. The company in charge of monitoring it was negligent and hadn't fixed it yet. What about your mail from Yuy? You received it per usual?'

'I don't make it to the posty until late. I'll let you know. So-- all he said was that you were better than your partner.'

'She's not my partner,' he began, before that fully registered. Maxwell and Yuy had already talked, if not much-- and Yuy had complimented him. He wasn't sure how to feel about that, except tentatively glad.

'Look, if someone is messing with our mail, then it's someone who's been watching long enough to know we've got a routine.'

'Or at least that Yuy does. It might be just about him.'

'I guess.' There was a loud clang over the line; Zechs hurriedly distanced himself from the receiver as it grated. Maxwell's swearing was almost as loud before it abruptly dropped volume-- the phone being set down-- and then there was fuzzy silence for a minute. Zechs waited it out, but just when he would have hung up to call back, Maxwell returned. 'I gotta go. Fucking chaos here. You still leaving or you staying to deal with this?'

'Leaving,' he said. 'Cobra and Mamba will follow up with the post office.'

'Okay. Thanks for handling Heero the way you did. A little goes a long way with him-- and with me.'

That definitely warmed him. 'I didn't do it for that,' he said.

'I know. You did it because it was right. Which is even better. Be good.'

He rubbed his collar, where his neck felt hot. 'You too.'

'Zechs-- when you get back--'?

'Yes?'

'Just don't forget about me on your trip.'

Not much chance of that. 'Good-bye, Duo.'
'Breathe, gents,' the foreman reminded them sharply.

The funicular rail car in which they rode scarcely allowed Zechs room for his long legs, and he seemed in constant danger of scraping his helmet on the ominously low roof of the tunnel. It was the most peculiarly claustrophobic experience of his life, and he had spent hundreds of hours in close quarters as a pilot. Then again, as a pilot, he'd known there was air, or space at least, on the other side of his enclosed mobile suit. The only thing on the other side of that tight rocky tunnel was a few thousand feet of compressed ice and sediment. His space suit felt cramped and clammy, and the sweat trickling down his neck had no-where to go. The hiss of oxygen as he inhaled was not reassuring.

The steep gradient of their downward journey was a concern of its own. The foreman had assured them-- gruffly and almost bored by their scepticism-- that the cable hauling their car was counterbalanced by another one of greater weight rising from the depth of the mine. To Zechs' mind, that was cold comfort. Pulleys did not seem adequate science to the otherwise awesome undertaking of asteroid mining. The foreman had only shrugged that simple didn't mean bad. All the same, Zechs longed for the comfort of something a little more-- modern.

It was nearly a twelve minute dive down that sharp incline before they suddenly halted. 'We're a half-kilometre in,' the foreman told him. 'Stay close. If you get lost, stay where you are and we'll find you. There's twenty-five kilometres of tunnel to wander if you take it into your fool head to find your own way.'

Tropic gave him a haunted look. Zechs was sure he looked similarly frozen. He managed a grunted agreement and tried to keep his face impassive.

The magnetised landing off the rail line grabbed their boots hard, but it was just barely wide enough for the three of them, and their climb wasn't over. Now they resorted to EVA-- a single queue float past more than seventy metre-markers. Zechs lost his count quickly, in the shuffle of adjusting to the passage, maintaining his torch, maintaining his death-grip on the implanted railing. Tropic at his back was near enough to bump him every few minutes, and so he went forward with gritted teeth and wound nerves. Zechs breathed a very deep sigh of relief when they finally reached bottom. Center of the asteroid.

'This mine has been open about thirty years, give or take,' the foreman announced, a tinny presence in their earpieces. 'Closed during the worst of the Occupation and the war years, so operating at full capacity maybe ten, twelve out of that. I've been Foreman here for three. No joke, it's a hard life, but Winner Enterprises vetts everyone before they get out here. Most problem we've ever had is disputes over holidays or overtime pay. The union is pretty strong but we're also pretty happy, all told. There's worse places to work. Honestly, if you've told me there'd be trouble, I would have thought it would come from the Harvesters.'

'Harvesters,' Tropic echoed questioningly.

'They operate the Grabbies. The ships that go out and collect the asteroids. Robots get 'em out of the Belt, but they only deliver back in-system as far as Mars. Humans got to bring them in from there. Long time in the Deep Dark, you know, away from your family or whoever. Harder on your health, too. Under WEI contracts you can't work Harvesting more than one trip per two calendar years, just can't, but there's private contractors and a lot of them, well. You ever seen someone who lives it out in the Cold?'
'SAS,' Tropic said.

Space Adaptation Syndrome. The Colony Project had nearly derailed because of it. Microgravity damaged the human body, there was no way around that, and radiation, and cramped living quarters. Human adaptability worked both ways, and people who lived in Space could re-adapt to Earth conditions given time, but there were long-term effects that science hadn't yet solved. Duty tours on the MO outposts were limited to five months for that reason, and those were proper stations with a fair amount of space and privacy. Zechs nodded his agreement.

'Money's good, though,' the foreman said. 'Duck up ahead here, we never got around to clearing that. This 'roid is pretty mined out. They'll either take it in for melting or kick it back out to the Belt probably by close of the year.'

'How many others in operation?' Zechs asked.

'Present, fourteen. We max out at twenty-four. I think with demand we'll get there-- the rare metals industry is recovering pretty well.' At last, solid ground, if one didn't think about what direction they might actually be facing. Tropic had his eyes resolutely closed, and Zechs wondered if his inner ear were giving him trouble. Earth-bound agents often had difficulty during short Space-ventures, and this certainly qualified as disorientating. Zechs prided himself on having a Spacer's disregard for questions of up or down, but even so, the moment his boots connected and locked on the mag plates at the tunnel's end, his stomach gave a relieved little lurch.

The foreman's phone beeped, and he used it to scan a metal panel tacked to the wall. Barcode, Zechs saw. 'I've got six men ahead,' the foreman reported, reading from his screen. 'There's supposed to be seven. I'll find out what happened with Eudes. I guess you know what to do from here?'

'Yes, thank you.' Zechs offered his hand, and the foreman shook quickly, maybe a little nervously. 'We'll wait for your return to go back?'

'Any of the men can take you when you're done with the interviews. Or beep me and I'll get you, right.' The foreman gave them a gruff nod. 'All said and done, though, I hope you don't find anything.'

'So do we.' Tropic got a handshake of his own. 'Thanks for your help, sir.'

'Divide them up?' Zechs asked his partner. 'Three each shouldn't take too long.'

'Not that I don't agree, but I think we'll get more if they face both of us. One can talk and the other watch.'

There was wisdom in that. Zechs squared his shoulders. He'd done unpleasant things before-- a few extra hours in the middle of an asteroid was survivable. He was fairly sure.

'Agents?'

They turned. Not the foreman, who was long gone-- it was a taller form free-falling down the tunnel, ignoring the rail except for the occasional push-off. The hand-torch bobbed distractingly, but the overhead strings hit on blond hair as a face mask caught the light. 'Quatre Winner,' the young man introduced himself, arriving with admirable grace precisely at the edge of the mag plate and grasping their hands one after the other. 'I'm glad I caught you.'

'Mr Winner, you visit the mines often?'
'Not as often as I like, but rather more often these days than I should have to.' In the bulky miner suit it was difficult to tell much about Winner's size, but standing he was nearly eye to eye with Zechs. 'I meant to meet you at the docks, but my morning meeting ran over. My crew are entirely at your disposal. I have employment files for your examination, including my own. Consider everything open for discussion. This is dangerous work, it's not a well-regulated field, and we rely on each other for our lives. If I've got anyone here in a position to harm anyone else, I want to know it.'

The brisk tone of a man accustomed to professional interaction. That handshake had been straightforward, tight, a good grip through the sausage-like fingers of the gloves. He'd interacted with Yuy and Trowa Barton years earlier, but of the adult Gundam Pilots he had now met, re-met, he was discovering them to be all different, so varied in personality from what he expected. Military types tended toward similarities, could often be identified immediately by those samenesses, as Zechs was sure he could. The military complex created those similarities deliberately. It challenged his adaptability, trying to determine which approach they wanted out of him.

Even as he thought it, he realised. There was a similarity between them all. All they really wanted out of him was honesty.

'We're open-minded in our approach,' Zechs assured him factually. 'But at this point I'm concerned about any possible connections to what's happening with Relena Peacecraft, Duo Maxwell, and Heero--'

'Heero's informed me,' Winner said. 'We knew this day might come when we agreed our identities should be public. Full disclosure, I lost employees over it, but they went with their pensions and I've received no complaints since. I've got a list of everyone who chose to leave, though I do believe it's highly unlikely any of them could get back on the mines without being identified. I rotate security measures every two months, I require background checks on everyone from the cleaning staff upward, including contractors, and every employee, including me, participates in trust exercises. If this is coming from outside Winner Enterprises, it will have to be organised to get in here.'

'None of which means that it won't get here.'

'That's true.' Winner flipped his torch, letting it float a few inches before catching it again. 'I appreciate Preventers' presence here. Anything you can do. Anything you need.'

'We'll keep you informed.'

'I appreciate it.' A second round of handshakes, even firmer than the last. 'And please, you're welcome to eat with me tonight on the colony. You'll want a good meal after a long day.'

'Quite the welcoming committee,' Tropic muttered at him, when they were alone again. 'Winner himself.'

'Mm,' Zechs answered absently. 'Interesting, though. Have you noticed the common theme?'

'Common theme?'

'Yuy and Maxwell's mail system. Winner's preparedness here. By and large, they're in constant anticipation of something like this happening. They've thought it out and they're ready for it.'

'You would have to be, wouldn't you? Like Winner said. People do know who they are. Relena
Peacecraft is no different. Controversial. Controversy attracts nutjobs.' Tropic cracked his knuckles. 'All right. Let's get it moving.'

'Right.' Zechs rescued his notepad. 'Behind you.'

**

'Nothing?' Sally said. 'Well, I suppose at least we accomplished some good by showing up.'

'We interviewed seventy-two miners,' Tropic shrugged. 'They'll spread the word to the ones we didn't get. We either chased it underground or didn't. For my money, there was nothing there to worry about. Sabotage might just be sloppy work.'

'Zechs?'

'I just maintain that we should be watching for a link between what's happening with Gundam Pilots on Earth and what's happening with them in Space.'

'So you think it was Yuy being targeted and not Relena?' Sally probed.

Zechs shook his head reluctantly. 'I can't claim that. Olsen did admit to stalking Relena, and she was the one he physically tried to get to. But I think it would be a mistake to ignore the fact that there's an uptick of incidences involving Gundam Pilots.'

'Can't argue with that.' Sally tapped her fingers on her desk. 'I suppose we can assume that Barton and Winner come as one, but let's get in touch with Chang on L5. He's never been the sort to share unsolicited, but if we ask directly we may find out if there's anything going on at his end.'

'I'll do that,' Tropic volunteered. 'I need to log some desk time anyway. Wind, you staying?'

'Planned on working from home for the rest of the day, actually.' He needed to run laundry, though he saw no reason to admit that. 'I'll be in tomorrow.'

'Don't come in on a Saturday,' Sally disagreed. 'God knows I won't. Stay home and relax. Nothing about this is urgent yet.'

'Thanks.' Tropic nodded to them both as he stood for the door. 'See you Monday, then.'

'Not the warmest,' Sally observed. 'You didn't have any problems with him?'

'Tropic?' Zechs asked, surprised. 'No. Not warm, as you say, but neither am I, particularly.'

'You have your moments.' She grinned briefly at him. 'No complaints, before you ask. He just doesn't pair up well with everyone. If you think you can work with him, maybe you'd consider making the arrangement permanent?'

He hadn't had a permanent partner since Noin. He'd waited on it, unwilling to commit to anyone who didn't mesh with him so easily-- Noin had always just known what he was thinking, known what needed doing. Tropic wasn't as easygoing, true, but when he was on the job he was fully on the job, and Zechs appreciated that. There was no mess and no worry. 'I can do that,' he decided. 'If he agrees.'
'I'll talk to him. If he says yes, I'll get you the paperwork next week.'

'There's paperwork for it now?'

'There was paperwork before. Lucy just did it for you.'

He hadn't known that. He wasn't surprised. 'Have you talked with her at all? Since the baby was born?'

'She's happy. They're all happy.' Sally propped her hand on her chin, watching him. 'She misses you.'

'I miss her.' Zechs folded his overcoat over his arm. 'Well. I'm going to get going.'

'Zechs-- while we're in private, can I have a word with you? About Duo Maxwell.'

He sank back into his seat. 'Is this a word between Director and Preventer?'

'Maybe. I don't know yet.' Sally chewed her knuckle. 'You're spending a lot of time with him.'

'Off the clock.'

'We do have rules, Zechs.'

'He's not under watch anymore. I don't see a conflict.'

'You're the one who thinks there's a link. Between the threats in Brussels--' 

'He's just a friend, Sally. And the last time you had a private word with me it was to tell me you were worried I wasn't settling in here.'

'I guess I did say that.' Sally tossed up her hands. 'Well, if you tell me it's just friends, I believe you. And I hereby supply you with the paperwork he'll need to fill out.'

'Are you kidding me?' The disc she handed him did not make him happy. Maxwell would explode. 'There's paperwork just to be friends?'

'There's paperwork that goes into your file so we know who your contacts are and who theirs are. Just in case.'

'There's no possible way he'll clear any security check. Not with his background.'

'Which is something you have to think about before you let it get any farther.'

That did not make him happy either. He tossed the disc back to the desk. 'I'm not giving that to him. It's insulting.'

'It's policy, Zechs. For you just as much as any other Preventer.'

'I'm not giving it to him. You want him to fill it out, you argue it with him.' He stood. 'For the record, I think if we reach the point where you disconnect us from the rest of humanity, you're at risk of creating a new Specials Unit. That's not what we were supposed to be.'

'Zechs—'

'I've got nothing else to say on the matter, Director.' He clenched his jaw, faced the wall until he
had himself back under control. 'Our strength is in not being like that, Sally. That's what we said in the early days.'

'I don't disagree. But this is the way it has to be for right now.' Her gaze was uncompromising. 'You can take that disc or not, but if it's not, I have to alert the SI Team. Maybe they can do an in-person interview, if that would be easier.'

'I'll ask him.' It burned him to even surrender that much. 'I'm tired,' he said finally. 'I'm going home.'

'Relax, Zechs. Enjoy your weekend.'

A little less so now. He managed a reasonably civil nod, and let himself out.

**

'Did you swish out the door?' Maxwell wanted to know.

'No,' Zechs said shortly. 'I do not swish.'

'You could. You've got the ass for it.' Maxwell pushed a black chequer across the board. 'What happens when I reach your side?'

'You become king.' He topped the chequer with another piece-- the third time he'd had that duty since they'd opened the game. 'You wouldn't happen to have stretched the truth about not playing draughts before?'

'Doesn't it make me look more genius to be a first-time player? I think it makes me look more genius.' Maxwell paused to dip a crudite in their hummus. 'Look, just give me the disc. I'll do the background check.'

'No,' Zechs protested. 'It's demeaning and ridiculous--'

'And kind of dumb, yeah. But if it's going to be the only thing that stops us from hanging out, that would be kind of dumb too.'

'I won't ask you to do it, Duo.'

'I like when you use my name. Usually you avoid it.' Maxwell crunched his carrot stick. 'Take it as a measure of friendship. Our friendship. And the other thing of which we do not speak, but which is totally going to happen when you stop telling yourself how wrong it is.'

His cheeks went ever so warm. 'It's an invasive process. The paperwork. And they can't possibly approve you. They couldn't approve any of us in Preventers, if we'd had to do these when we were forming. All of us are dangerous, suspicious.' He moved his white chequer without thinking too hard about it, and saw his mistake as soon as he let it go. He at least had the pleasure of watching Maxwell crow over it, squirming happily in his chair as he jumped one of his kings over the chequer and capturing it. 'Gloating is so attractive,' he teased.

'Hell yeah it is.' Maxwell smirked at him. 'Did I win yet?'

'No, but I don't think there's any doubt you will.' He moved his next piece more carefully, and it
stayed safe as Maxwell took a diagonal with one of his kinged chequers. 'How's Yuy?'

'Oh, Lord. It was in the paper how Relena went on a date with some schmuck from France or somewhere and Heero's all end of the world.'

'I meant about the mail.'

'Oh, that. Yeah. We're doing text messages until we figure out a better replacement for the mail thing. It was a good excuse to upgrade my phone. I dropped the other one while you were gone. Check it.' Maxwell produced the new one from his shirt pocket; Zechs made appropriate noises of approval. 'I know it's a stupid thing to spend your money on, but I'm gadget-happy. Heero just doesn't see the beauty in it. With a phone like this you almost don't need a Gundam.'

'Speaking of Gundams,' Zechs began.

'Hold up. If we're going to talk serious shit, I want a beer.' Maxwell abandoned his stool and opened Zechs' refrigerator. 'You want?'

'Sure.' A bottle of lager arrived at his hand a moment later. Zechs twisted off the tab and clinked it against his tabletop. Maxwell rejoined the table, sitting back, looking at him more soberly now. Not protesting the change in tone. Not forestalling questions.

'You don't have to do the background check,' Zechs said, sideways of what he meant, but feeling he needed to repeat it.

'If I minded, I wouldn't do it. If you don't want me to do it, that's cool, though.'

'It's not that.' It had been on his mind maybe as long ago as the day he'd gone with Neptune to meet Yuy. Definitely since meeting Quatre Winner, who had been ineffably polite, cordially distant, and aggressively insistent on opening his life to their examination. 'I suppose what I mean to ask is-- I__'

'It doesn't have to be elegant. Spit it out. We'll process it together.'

He managed a small smile for that and buried it in his beer. 'Your lives here. The others of you, the ones in Space.'

'Wufei and Quorwa?'

'Quorwa?' he repeated, distracted.

'The Siamese couple. Quatre and Trowa. They've been joined at the dong since 195.'

He had barely seen Barton. He'd assumed nothing, but now it seemed that might have been deliberate. Interesting. 'I just wondered why you and Yuy chose to stay on Earth.'

'You really don't know?' Maxwell tipped his beer back. 'You kind of said something before and I thought maybe you were being a jerk. But you don't know, do you.'

'Know what? I never tried to offend you.'

'No. Sorry. For thinking that.' Maxwell rolled his beer between both palms. 'We're here because they don't let us leave.'

He felt something very still in his stomach. 'Who doesn't let you leave.'
'Interpol. Preventers. The municipality of Brussels. Take your pick.'

'I don't understand--'

'I guess I forgot. You jacked it for Mars, right after the Barton Rebellion.' Maxwell rolled his beer, and set it gently down. 'After it. Heero was stuck in hospital for a while. I made it out, me and Quat and Trowa, and we got rid of the Gundams. But I came back for him while the others beat it for the Cold. Heero was really poorly-- he just needed time, but we weren't sure, not back then. Anyway. There was a lot of attention to the fact that the Gundam Pilots were involved in putting down the Rebellion. It brought up a lot of crap from the war. And there were enough around who knew who we were, it got out. There were a couple of guys from the war who went on air with interviews, and all the sudden there's crowds every day at the hospital, and reporters and shit, and we went from one Preventer standing at the door to a whole phalanx blocking all the exits. Took them about two weeks to arrest us. Saw it coming, but Heero, you know. I couldn't leave him. Knew I'd never get near him again if I left him. So yeah, they took us in. Held us in one of the old asylum centres. They gave us a trial, eventually-- a lot faster than I expected, actually. About nine months.'

'Nine months?' He was shocked. 'Under what charge? How did they hold you that long?'

'There were all kinds of outstanding warrants from the war. They picked a handful. I had a lawyer, even. He was a nice guy, you know. Cared about what happened to us. Anyway. Mostly they wanted the Gundams, but like I said, we'd already got rid of them. And anyway in the end we'd fought on the right side, or the winning side, or whatever you want to call it, so they couldn't pack us off to a max security holding without opening a big fucking backdoor on everyone who'd been given official amnesty after the war. So we agreed we'd stay put. Be watched. No criminal charges, no time in prison. They leave us mostly alone.'

'That doesn't make it right.' As angry as he'd been about the background checks, this had him infuriated. 'They don't have the right to pick and choose who to prosecute—'

'They've got all the right that big guns gives them.'

The knot in his gut clenched tight again. 'I'm sorry.'

'You didn't do it.' Maxwell drank. 'Look. It is what it is. Mostly we live our lives and there's not much stopping us from doing it.'

'I can't believe Yuy agreed to this.' A thought occurred. 'I can't believe Relena did.'

'She's never said it outright, but I have a feeling she's part of why we get as much freedom as we do. I'm not complaining, Zechs. I like what I've got here. I have hope it won't be forever. I miss my friends, I miss Space, but for now, I can live with this.' He winked, though it didn't entirely erase the darkness behind his eyes. 'Compared to that, background check's not so bad.'

That revelation made what he'd really wanted to say all the more pointed. 'Why would you want to... be with... spend---'

'Date. You're looking for the word “date”.'

'Why do you want us to date, Duo. Given everything that's happened.'

'I'm glad you finally got the backbone to ask.' Maxwell finished his beer and put it aside. 'You don't seem to accept this concept, but I think we're not unalike. I also think the war is over and that it doesn't really matter who you were or what you thought you were doing. We all believed in what
we were doing, we all questioned the righteousness of what we did. And the world seems to have picked itself up without too much advice from us, so I guess we're all aware of where we stand. I respect your decision to join Preventers and I respect that you've got your shit together. It's no small thing. I think you're kind of funny, mostly not on purpose, I think you're very nicely sincere and smart and your apartment doesn't smell bad, so you're probably a decent housekeeper. And you're interested.'

'Duo—'

'Why don't you tell me now why you don't want us to date.'

Try as he did, he couldn't muster a real reason. 'It just doesn't bother you?' he asked finally.

'No. And you may not have figured this out yet, but it doesn't bother you, either. Or you wouldn't have ever come over the first time I asked you out.'

That seemed a sensible conclusion. 'You talk a good game,' he said.

The corners of Maxwell's eyes crinkled. 'I like to win at everything. Talking, too.'

'I think I give in,' he replied. 'Fold.'

'Atta boy. You might even like it.'

He could only laugh. 'I'll let you know.'
Five

Dating did have one major advantage over mere friendship.

He'd had occasional liaisons with other men-- and one educationally awkward experience with Noin at the tender age of sixteen-- but they'd largely been unromantic. Sex at Victoria Academy was a student tradition, and it was the tradition of the adult officers in charge to try to stop it by such effective means as curfews and gender separation. Zechs had done what all teenagers did, which amounted to anything that could be accomplished with one eye over the shoulder and boots still securely tied at the ankle.

Duo called it 'making out'. It could be accomplished on almost any surface-- against a wall, on the couch, sitting on the stairs outside their apartments, once at a table at a street café. Zechs had never spent so much time doing nothing but kissing. He had to buy a new tube of lip balm. It was fantastic.

It did wonders for his mood, as well. He smiled at work. When he handed in Duo's background check, Sally was so surprised at him that he actually grinned at her. He helped Tropic move his desk up from the fourth to sixth floor of their building, and caught himself whistling as he carted boxes. He joined the cycle class in the gym, emerging exhausted but determined to make a better showing the next time he went biking with Duo. He had more energy and he slept better. Even Neptune's flirting didn't bother him now.

There were no further reports of mischief on the mines of L4. Duo and Yuy had a new system-- so he was informed-- which was so far invulnerable. Relena went about her business per usual. The boy who'd been stalking her received a plea bargain for six years at a half-way house programme which would allow him to attend courses at a local school, while supervised. His new caseload involved the disappearance of illegal immigrants on the Syrian border, work that kept he and Tropic out of Brussels as often as in it, but that was all right. Homecoming had its advantages, too.

**

'No, moron, you're supposed to guess which hand.'

'Left?'

'Loser.' Duo displayed an open palm. 'Too bad, because the prize was really excellent.'

'I can't have it anyway?'

'I love when you try to bat your eyelashes at me. You're the worst flirt ever.' But it got him a lingering kiss. 'You want your prize?'

'Please.' Zechs relaxed on his elbows on the bar. Duo had his phone in the dock belting out cheerful Christmas music, and there was a box of decorations spread open over the coffee table. The apartment smelled even better than usual; Duo didn't cook much meat, but the pheasant that had gone into the oven on his arrival was an impressive beast, glazed with Madeira and redcurrant and awaiting the reduction of cranberry, chestnut, and orange that was simmering on the stove. Practise, Duo had said.
A small box landed on the counter before him. 'It's not a ring or anything,' Duo said. 'So don't freak out. Also I don't want anything back, I just thought, you know, spur of the moment. We're not really at this stage yet, but.'

'Duo.' Surprise was the primary emotion he felt, mixed-- mixing rapidly-- with a cautious reluctance. They really weren't at a stage where this sort of thing could be considered normal. Their official tally of dates could still be counted on one hand. And despite the kissing, they'd never even gone to what Duo delicately referred to as 'second base'.

'Chill, it's not that big a deal. Open it.'

He prised the lid from the base and nudged aside an edge of crinkled tissue. 'A thumb drive?'

'Work-out track. It's the one I use when I'm biking alone. I figure what with you travelling so much, you could use a pick-me-up sometimes. It works on most gym readers, in your car. You can jack it into a phone, too, and use earbuds.'

'That's thoughtful. Thank you.'

'Well don't flip out over it or anything.'

He had to laugh. He snagged Duo by the collar and pressed his lips to Duo's jaw. 'Thank you.'

'Better.' Duo returned a peck to his nose, and went back to his attempt to carve carrot roses. 'So what's your week look like?'

'Desk-bound for at least the next four days. We won't know if we have to go back out until we know, I gather. You?'

'Work. Christmas is a good season for us. Everyone and their mother starts to worry about wear and tear when it gets cold out. Probably clock some overtime next two weeks, maybe even through the New Year.' He peeled back his sleeve to show Zechs a deep red-edged cut stitched five times with black suture. 'Got that last Tuesday. Had to get a tetanus jab. You should've seen the suit I was working on. Rust-bucket doesn't even begin to describe it. I hate those old junkers. There hasn't been a B-Art4 that's worked right in a hundred years and they want me to turn it around in three days? Whatever.'

'I guess that answers whether you'll have time on Saturday.'

'Maybe.' Duo paused with his knife stroking gently at the inside of his thumb. 'Are you asking me out?'

'Well... I was going to try.'

Duo grinned fleetingly. 'I'll find time. I actually already took the day off, because I have a thing where I volunteer. The annual award luncheon. But after that cleans up I can take a few extra hours.'

'I really only had the morning free,' he said apologetically. 'I owe a report by Saturday afternoon.'

'Damn.' Duo surveyed his last carving and flipped it into the trash with a grimace. 'You can come to the luncheon. I'm doing set-up and hair-net, but then I'm done. There's always extra food, I could at least feed you.'

It wasn't incredibly appealing, but he did want to see Duo while he was in town. 'If it won't disrupt
anything to have me there.'

'You can be my plus-one. I always try inviting Heero but he won't come, he hates it.'

'You've haven't talked much about him lately.'

'We fight a lot this time of year.' Duo went silent for a while, turning away to stir his reduction. Zechs decided to wait him out, give him time. 'The thing you've got to understand about me and Heero,' Duo said finally. 'We always just clicked. But it's like that happened completely in absentia from our actual personalities. It just fucking kills me that he's stuck in that apartment. I offered to put in a word with him at the shop. I'm not going to lie and say it was easy for them to accept me there, but it happened. It could benefit him, get him interacting again. He was so messed up after the Barton Rebellion, though, and then instead of fixing anything he just fell into bed with Relena, and that was never going to be an answer. So I say come out with me. We can do shit that he likes, it doesn't have to be all my stuff. But the most I can get out of him is a walk around the block, and it doesn't get him out of his own head.'

Zechs pocketed his thumb drive and concentrated on flattening the tissue from the box. 'What do you mean, out of his own head?'

'I can deal with being stuck here, but he can't. He hates it here. And he would completely take off, if it weren't for me. He stays for me, so sometimes when it's getting to him, he hates me. Ergo. And it pisses me the fuck off. He can go if he wants to. I'll deal with that too.'

Zechs wasn't sure what to make of that. He'd skirted around the question of just how deep the relationship between Duo and Yuy was, but that seemed to hint at possibilities beyond just friendship. Still, he didn't feel like-- if they weren't at a stage where gifts could be easily explained and dates still mostly involved the 'getting to know you' conversations, it wasn't really his place to demand anything. 'I'm sorry,' he settled on saying.

'Yeah, well.' Duo turned back with the spoon. Zechs obediently tasted the reduction. Duo licked the spoon clean after he'd had his test. 'So we're good for Saturday. I'll write the address down for you. Come around ten, half after. You'll get out of set-up and we can stand in the back after everything's served up. Then maybe we can pick up a movie or something.'

'All right.' He smoothed the edges of the tissue and folded it very carefully in half. 'Duo...'

'Yeah?'

'I want-- think-- was just making sure--'

'This stutter thing you do when you're getting personal is so cute I could scream.'

His neck heated. He rubbed it away. 'I just want to be sure we're on the same page. About us. That this is-- exclusive.'

'You mean you want to be sure I'm not slipping the salami to other hot guys while you're gone?'

'That's not precisely how I meant it.'

'I'm not.' Duo toyed with the spoon, twirling it in his agile fingers. 'Are you?'

His neck was hot again. 'I'm not.'

'Then it looks like we're on the same page, doesn't it?'
'So it seems.'

'That's good, then.' Duo turned off the stove's burners. 'The pheasant has about ten more minutes. Cooks fast once it gets in there. So it'll be you, me, Heero, Relena, and whoever Relena's French boyfriend is. I'm predicting super-awkward, so the better the food is, the more we'll have to talk about.'

'Maybe I should rethink my RSVP.'

'Har-har. Maybe you'll get lucky and come down with the 'flu.'

'I'll consider it.'

'Hey,' Duo said. 'Full disclosure. The thing on Saturday at the Jewish Centre--'

Zechs twisted to look at the Christmas decorations. 'I didn't realise you were Jewish.'

'What? Oh. No, I'm not. They let us use the space on Mondays and Saturdays.'

'Us?'

'Us. Small Arms. It's a NGO for child soldiers who were granted asylum in Belgium. We do DDR-disarming, demobilisation, re-integration. Support.'

He looked sharply at Duo. 'Child soldiers?'

'Yeah.' Duo wasn't quite meeting his eyes. 'I got involved four years ago. My lawyer, the one who represented me at my trial? He's a member. President, now. He got me into it.'

'To volunteer?'

'Not at first. To, um, benefit from their services.'

He couldn't have articulated why he was shocked. He was, though. Duo wasn't looking at him at all now, pretending to be absorbed in shredding leaves from a rosemary stem.

'There's five thousand kids involved in combat every day,' Duo said. 'There were twenty-one hundred at Libra that we know about. And a lot of them got captured and put in jail and put on trial like I did, no matter how old they were when they fought. We don't have a lot of rights. Most laws say if you're fifteen you're old enough to be voluntary, regardless of when you got pulled in, what they did to you to make you fight. The ones who get asylum are rare. The ones who get put on trial aren't as rare. A lot of these kids came out of POW camps, or juvie detention, or even just immigration holds.'

All he could think was that he could understand why Yuy didn't attend. He wasn't sure he would have agreed if he'd known beforehand. He had a new view on that image of Heero Yuy, twenty-one year old shut-in. Duo seemed younger too, suddenly. Yet they were as old as he had been when he'd been promoted to Lieutenant. Zechs himself was the age at which Treize had become commander of a globe-spanning military. OZ had fielded whole battalions of Academy students as the war intensified. White Fang, as well. He'd been aware of it. He hadn't thought twice about it.

'Why would you?' Duo answered, and Zechs realised he'd muttered the last aloud. 'I didn't, either. Til Pieter wanted to present the defence for me. I didn't let him at first. Said I knew very well, thank you, what I was doing. Took me a long time to come around on the idea. It was Heero who really made me think. What they did to him. I think he'd really like Small Arms, if he would just
give it a chance. You know, the war went on for so long-- not just the active outbreak of combat, but mobilisation, resistance all over. Almost a whole century of some kind of armed fighting. That's why they needed us, the kids. That's why fifty percent of the planet is under the age of thirty. We've been killing people off for a hundred years. These kids, they're really amazing people. It's really amazing to watch them.'

'But you're all right,' Zechs said, a protest against what he wasn't sure. His muscles felt stiff. He felt-- accused. It was an effort to keep his own eyes straight ahead, on the stove timer counting down.

'I had a really bad temper. Have. Nightmares. I've never been to school. I'll probably spend the rest of my life in mediocre jobs because I'll be unhireable. I'm going to wonder for the rest of my life if I really chose my Gundam or if they just let me think I did. If there'd be more people alive in the world today if I'd been old enough to make sound judgments. And I'm a success story.' He saw Duo shrug from the corner of his eyes. 'So you can see why I don't care what you did or who you fought for. Honestly, it's almost a relief you are who you are. I don't know if I'd know how to talk to someone who was normal.'

'I don't think my situation is equivalent.'

'It's not. But that doesn't matter. To me, at least. If it matters to you, I guess now would be a good time to say so. Or if you need to think about it. Or, like, rescind your RSVP, like you said.'

'No.'

'No what? No you don't want to come? No you don't want to be exclusive?'

'No, I don't need to think about it. And no, it doesn't not matter-- it does matter. Everything you tell me about yourself matters, if we are going to be anything to each other.'

A tentative smile touched Duo's face. 'Really?'

'Now who's not on the same page?'

That earned him a rather serious kiss. Then another. The third came with an arm sliding around his neck, hips nudging between his knees on the stool. He settled his arms around Duo's waist, taking comfort, he supposed, in the fact that this part of their new relationship was unharmed by surprises. He framed the muscles in Duo's back with his palms, applied himself to the warm slide of Duo's tongue against his. 'You smell good,' he murmured.

'So do you.' Duo rested against him, cheek on his shoulder, relaxed in his hold. 'This part is so great. I love this part.'

'Which part is that?'

'The part where it's all new and forgivable and it's exciting just to taste each other.'

He took a deep breath. 'There are other parts that are exciting, too.'

'Tell me more about that.' Duo played with the top button of Zechs' shirt. 'Feel free to be detailed.'

'Parts lying down. Together.'

'Uh-huh.' Duo licked his throat, leaving a rash of gooseflesh behind. 'Bed parts, you mean.'
'Not sex parts,' he corrected quietly. 'But maybe... a step up from this.'

'I might be persuadable.'

He got no further than untucking Duo's shirt before he oven timer reached its end and buzzed noisily. Duo's sigh puffed the hair by his ear. He chuckled, and dropped his hands back to Duo's hips.

'That's a bummer,' Duo said. 'But no way in hell am I re-heating my test-dinner.' He left a final nip on Zechs' lower lip and stepped back. 'Resume after eating?'

Zechs scraped his hair back and let it fall. 'Of course,' he said neutrally. 'Starving.'

'Liar. Horny liar.' Duo flashed his taut stomach, then danced back when Zechs grabbed for him. He trailed laughter all the way back into the kitchen.

**

'I think we should take a closer look at the human trafficking angle,' Tropic said. 'What were the names of those two sisters--'

'The ones from Baghdad?'

'Right. We've been assuming this is related to the systemic violence, people just getting out of town and getting rid of saleable daughters while they do it. What if it's really the actual flesh-peddling that's driving the crime? Is Interpol watching any rings in the area?'

'There's a few, but their movements are pretty well known. If this is a dozen small-timers, we'll have a hard effort at cracking it.'

'Let's at least look at the possibility.'

'Right. We--' His phone vibrated against his belt. 'Just a moment.' He checked the number, and rose from his desk with a nod to his partner. He stepped away from their shared cubicle and walked to the hall as he answered the call. 'Zechs.'

'Uhhh,' was the response. 'Is it fucking over yet?'

'Is what over, Duo?'

'This day. This year. I've been hip-deep in hell since six. I want a stiff drink and maybe a little pickle-tickle. You in?'

Sometimes he was absolutely sure Duo liked to shock him. His face went red. He pushed off from the wall he was leaning on and hurried for the shelter of the restroom. 'Now?'

'I have to clean up. I could meet you in your end of town in an hour?'

It was late enough. He'd had a long day himself, and he and Tropic were going to have to leave Brussels again, endangering Duo's Christmas dinner date. 'I can do that. There's a wine bar about three blocks from here. Trattoria Green.'
'They serve anything stronger than wine?'

'Yes,' he said patiently, knowing that was more of a gripe than a real demand. Duo rarely drank more than one serving-- he claimed it made him sleepy. 'And food. We could have a late supper.'

'Deal. Trattoria Green. I'll be there.'

'Deal,' he echoed.

'You're headed out?'

He jumped, and accidentally beeped his phone as he turned. Tropic had sneaked up on him and stood only a few feet away, scowling.

'Meeting a friend,' he said.

'We were working,' Tropic returned.

'It's late. We can pick it up in the morning.' He stowed his phone back in his pocket. 'You're welcome to join us.' Though that would kibosh Duo's tickling plans.

Fortunately, his courtesy flew right past his partner. 'I thought you were more serious about our duty,' Tropic said disapprovingly. 'You should be more careful. This is how people get a reputation for frivolity.'

That stung. 'I believe I work as hard as any agent here,' he replied coolly. 'We've more than worked a full day. Frankly, I don't think we're getting anywhere by straining ourselves until we're exhausted. The Director herself--'

'Hiding behind the apron strings?'

He restrained himself to a frosty stare. 'Make it an official complaint or quit bitching, Tropic.'

For a moment, the clenched jaw and curled fists Tropic wore convinced him that something was going to snap. Then, so abruptly he doubted he'd even seen the anger, Tropic dropped the pose, smiled easily at him.

'Sorry,' Tropic said ruefully. 'Tired. Taking it out on innocent bystanders. Clearly you've got the right idea-- a little R-and-R before we head out again.'

Zechs forced his own lips up. 'Sleep it off.'

'Will do. Enjoy your night.'

He tried to shake it off, but his confrontation with Tropic stayed with him as he walked the streets to the bar. Had he been distracted by personal matters? He hadn't thought so-- but it was in character. He'd spent most of his life occupied with one personal disaster after another-- vengeance for his murdered parents, the inevitable-seeming match of strength against Heero Yuy, even his exile those years on Mars. Duo satisfied so many things for him, his curiosity, his restlessness in a city he couldn't call home, his desire, apparently not so very latent desire, to have back a little of that inclusivity he'd had during the war, a belonging to a group of select, high talented individuals who had piloted Gundams. Gundam Pilot, that most rarefied of titles, and the meaning it conveyed; a state of being unparalleled. Of course he still wanted that. Being personally pre-occupied had in some part to do with being convinced of his own specialness. He'd been born a prince, a noble. Treize had fed that sense in him, too, flattered his skills, flattered his rebelliousness. The Lightning
Count had been able to break any rule he wanted, until Romafeller had begun to chase him out of OZ. Then he had been able to be Miliardo Peacecraft again, leader of White Fang, invincible warrior, wielder of invincible weapons. He'd been chafing at Preventers, lately. Was his relationship with Duo just a symptom of a disease?

He'd worked himself into a thoroughly agitated state by the time Duo showed up at the bar. He'd secured them a table against the wall, a little two-seater on stools, but Duo saw him immediately and came charging through the crowd, slipping between couples so smoothly they didn't even notice until he was past them. Zechs tried to unstiffen his spine, but he still choked on the kiss Duo tried to give him.

Duo pulled back, gazing at him with suspicion. 'You're pissy,' he said.

'No. Not at you.' He managed to take Duo's hand without ruining it. Duo settled on his stool, mouth screwed to the side as he chewed the inside of his cheek. 'Are you hungry? I ordered a steak salad.'

'Yeah, I could eat, but mostly I really want a beer.' Duo tapped his fingers on their table. 'Something go bad at work? You didn't mention during our call, but I kind of commandeered that thing.'

'What is it you always say about Yuy? Locked in my own head.'

'I hear that.' Duo dropped his chin to his hand. 'It's seasonal. We should do something to buck the trend. Want to go ice-skating tomorrow? There's a park with a rink.'

Time for that news. 'I'm headed back out tomorrow evening,' he said.

'Fuck. Seriously, fuck that. I hate your fucking job almost as much as I hate mine.' Duo sat up straight. 'You will be back for Christmas, right?'

'I'm going to try.'

'Fuck.' Duo pulled a menu under his elbow and bent his head over it. Zechs let him stew, sipping his own glass of chardonnay. Sometimes Duo's temper welcomed coddling, and sometimes he had to talk himself out of it. He did make sure the steward saw them, though. Getting that beer on the table would help.

'Okay,' Duo said finally. 'Sorry. Sorry. I'm over it. It's just been a really shitty day. They were playing all this news footage, retrospective on the war and the Rebellion. The television is on in the garage. It's really hard to hide when you're working on a group repair.'

'I'm sorry, too. I know how that feels.'

'Guess you do.' Duo squeezed his hand. 'We're both sorry. Let's just wipe the slate clean, start over.'

'Would you rather go home? If you're worried about being recognised today--' it is what it is. I don't let it chase me out of the public. I just let it almost ruin my week.' Duo's teeth showed in a grin. 'We'll have our drink, our dinner. And then if we do go home, we can maybe try that bed part thing.'

Duo got his beer, a local lager, and Zechs got his salad. Duo kept up a steady flow of innocuous conversation, a gift Zechs envied. It did shift the mood, though. Soon Zechs was smiling at Duo's jokes, and Duo played with his fingers, tickled his palm, even kissed his knuckles. It mollified his
worries about Duo being just a distraction, too. There was a maturity in their relationship that he liked, but at the root of it, Duo just made him feel good.

'Man,' Duo said. He rolled his head on his shoulders. 'That's a good beer. My toes are tingling.'

'Would you like another?'

'Maybe. Hell, why not. But I'm going to duck in the loo. Order it for me?'

'Of course.' He searched the room for their steward again as Duo slipped off his stool and disappeared. He waggled Duo's glass rather than wait for the man to cross to their table. He glanced at his phone for the time. It was well after ten, and they both had long days ahead of them. Maybe he should suggest they go home separately after all.

'Back.' Duo stumbled trying to climb back onto his stool. 'Whoops.'

Zechs grabbed him by the belt and held him steady until he was seated. 'Should I cancel that second beer?'

'I do feel a little loose. Did it have higher alkla-- alcohol content?' Duo covered his mouth. 'Whoops again. I might be a sloppy drunk.'

That decided him. 'Let's walk for a while outside. The air should help.' He couldn't find their steward this time, so he went to the bar to pay for their meal. He left a generous tip to cover the undrunk order. When he returned, Duo was humming along with the music, eyes lazily low. Zechs paused to admire the view, and spontaneously kissed him.

'Well now,' Duo said. A sly smile curved his mouth. 'That was awfully nice.'

'So are you.' He held out his hand. 'Shall we off?'

'Off we shall indeed.' Duo made it off his stool in one piece, but immediately cozied up to Zechs. Zechs put a careful arm around him. 'You're tall, whoa.'

'Uh, yes.' He guided Duo across the floor. It was mostly young people in the bar now, students who had no-where to be in the early morning. He buttoned Duo's coat at the door-- Duo made it an exercise in acrobatics by sneaking in kisses like missile strikes, including one to his ear that triggered an automatic shiver. He pushed them out into the cold winter air with some relief for the heat on his face.

'So about that bed stuff,' Duo announced. 'I've got some ideas. Very cinematic ideas.'

'Cinematic?'

'You're doing that thing again where you just repeat me.' Duo laughed at that as if it were a great joke. 'You've got all these tics, man. It's so funny.' He captured Zechs' hand and pulled it back over his shoulder. 'So yeah, this bed idea. I think it's super. I think we'd be super in bed together.' He laughed again, a little giggle that left him breathless.

He turned them up the path he'd come. He could use the company car to drive Duo home. This late, traffic wouldn't be an issue. 'You like taking it slow, Duo.'

'I know and you've been totally great about it, I really appreciate that. It's not like I want either of us to be walking around with epic blue balls, you know? It's just nerves. My nerves. Working myself up to it. But I totally want to do it now.'
'What precipitated that change of heart?'

'Well fucking look at you! You're hot, man. You're the hottest guy I've ever done it with. Will do it with, future tense, I guess. What's plu-perfect tense?'

He was relieved when the Preventers parking garage came in view as they rounded a corner. 'I'm not sure.'

'You are so. You're educated. I love it. Love love love.'

'Duo.'

'Love you say my name all the time now. But loved it when you kept calling me “Maxwell” all the time too. Maxwell. Maxwell.' Duo dropped his voice in what Zechs supposed was an imitation of him. 'Maxwell this, Maxwell that.'

He directed Duo toward the stairs that would take them to the second level parking. 'How are you feeling?'

'Super. Zechs, Zechs, let's make out in the stairwell.'

He grabbed Duo's hands and faced him forward again. 'We're almost at the car.'

'Car's better. Good call.'

He pressed his thumb to the identity lock on the first company vehicle they encountered, and it popped open for him. He moved to open the passenger door, but Duo was ahead of him, and crawled into the backseat. Zechs stooped to make sure the belt of his coat made it inside, and Duo captured him by the collar. He ducked in, tucking himself sideways inside the cab. He just got the door shut before Duo pulled him down, wrapping a long leg around him, and locked lips with him.

'Duo,' he tried. 'Duo, you're inebriated.'

'Hot,' Duo muttered against his neck. 'For you. So hot.' He fumbled with Zechs' coat, wrenching it open. He made good progress on Zechs' shirt while Zechs tried to determine whether or not this situation fell under an uncomfortably hazy definition of consent. That effort derailed a bit when Duo opened his belt and cupped him at the groin. 'There it is. Gimme.'

'Duo.' He pressed their mouths together. Duo met him hungrily. Duo's fingers knew their job, stroking him through his cotton undershorts. He lost a knee off the edge of the seat, and Duo hugged him closer, finding skin everywhere. He had to forcibly detach himself. 'Duo, stop. You'll regret this later.'

'I'm open for business and you're seriously turning me down?'

'You're not open for business, you're-' As soon as the thought occurred to him he reached up for the overhead light. 'Let me look at your eyes.'

'We're so past the point of romantic staring.'

'Stop that.' He knocked Duo's hand away from his nipple. 'Your eyes are dilated. You're flushed and warm. You had a twelve ounce beer.'

'And?' Duo squeezed the back of his thigh. 'And what.'

'I've seen you drink. You've never reacted like this. This is beyond lowered impulses. Duo, I think
'You're drugged.'

'Wha—' Duo giggled again, but it trailed off uncertainly, a little of the colour leaving his face. 'What?'

He sat upright and pulled Duo with him. 'How are you feeling? Did the beer taste strange?'

'I don't know, maybe a little salty. It was local, I thought it was-- you really think...'

'It didn't arrive in a bottle. Anyone could have had access to it.' Damn, he was thinking, imagining how very easy it would have been. The disappearing server. 'Yuy's mail. The sabotage on L4. There is someone after all of you.'

The last of the laughter in Duo's face was gone. He was pale except for two bright spots high in his cheeks. 'I want to go home,' he said.

'No.' He leaned over Duo and pushed open his door. 'Get in front. I'm taking you to hospital.'

'No, Zechs, I don't--'

'We need proof. Club drugs don't stay in the system for long. Come on, I'm behind you.'

As well. He was in time to hold Duo's hair back when he vomited. Duo was weak afterward, now patently disorientated. He wiped Duo's chin and belted him into the front passenger seat, closed him in. As he ran for the driver's side, he was dialling for emergency aid.

'Preventers Agent Wind,' he identified himself. 'I'm on my way to UCL-Saint-Luc with a man who's been drugged, possibly overdosing, rohypnol or maybe GHB, with alcohol. I'm fifteen minutes away. I need priority care waiting.'
Six

Duo woke with a gasp and a start, staring wide-eyed around him. 'Duo,' Zechs said, calling a blank gaze his way.

Then Yuy stepped out of the corner. He barely moved-- so silent he didn't even disturb the air-- as he laid his hand on Duo's chest.

But Duo sighed deeply, his eyes sliding closed, his tense muscles relaxing. Calm.

'You're in hospital,' Yuy said. 'You're all right.'

'Hospital.' Duo sighed again, and pushed at the thick blanket covering him. He patted Yuy's hand. 'Am I supposed to remember anything?'

'What is the last thing you recall?' Zechs asked him. He moved in, and Yuy moved away-- back to his self-chosen post between the vitals monitor and the privacy curtain. Zechs rolled a stool to Duo's gurney. Duo rubbed his eyes, looking blearily at him.

'Work,' Duo said finally. 'I remember they're showing the yearly evil war montage. I just wanted out of there. Wait-- hospital?'

'I brought you in last night,' Zechs told him. 'It's about-- seven in the morning, I think.'

'Hospital.' Duo pushed himself up on his elbows, wiggling his toes beneath the blanket, popping a knee. He looked at Yuy. 'Why is this a recurring motif in our relationship?'

Zechs wouldn't have sworn to it in court, but it was at least possible Yuy's expression was a smile. 'You're all right,' Yuy said again.

'So what exactly happened?'

'We were out to dinner,' Zechs explained. 'You had a beer. You started acting-- strange. I brought you in and you tested positive for gamma-hydroxybutyric acid. GHB. A very high dose. It's not surprising if you're experiencing some amnesia.'

'Drug-related amnesia? Are you serious? Does this even happen in real life?' Duo examined the oximetre on his finger, and pulled it off. The rip of velcro on the blood pressure monitor made Zechs set his teeth.

'You shouldn't do that,' he said.

'Zechs, no offence, but I'm not staying here. I'm leaving, right now. Heero, are there forms?'

Zechs hadn't even seen the clipboard that Yuy produced from atop the supply cabinet. 'I filled them out. Sign where I dog-eared it.'

'You can't just sign out,' Zechs protested.

'I can, too. They don't have the right to keep me if I'm conscious and I agree I'm leaving AMA.' Duo flung his blanket aside and took the clipboard to his knee. His scrawling signature was a little unsteady, and his first step off the gurney was tentative, but he made it upright. Yuy thoughtfully tugged the hospice gown closed over Duo's bare behind. 'Either of you have a car?'
Zechs abandoned the idea of trying to talk them out of behaving like jailbreakers and just opted to cut them off. He threw back the curtain and went straight to the door. It didn't have a lock, but he stood square in front of it, arms folded over his chest. The room's other patient, a slumbering elderly woman, never stirred.

'Someone tell me what's the hurry,' Zechs said.

'Hostile territory,' Yuy said.

'Is that a joke?'

Duo was shrugging into Yuy's coat. 'Zechs,' he said. 'Please try to get this. We don't stay in government care. It ends badly for us. Okay? I'm well enough to move, I can finish recovering in my apartment where they can't arrest me at will. I know it sounds paranoid, but I'd rather be paranoid and safe than paranoid and stuck here.'

'I'm a Preventer. If there was any kind of arrest coming, I'd know about it. You're the victim, Duo.'

'You're my boyfriend at the moment, not a Preventer. You really think they'd tell you?' No shoes, but Yuy had thought of that, too, and he knelt at Duo's feet to double up his hospital-provided stockings. Duo leaned wearily on his shoulder. 'Zechs, I know it's crazy. I really do. But it's not the craziest thing that's ever happened. I just don't have good history with hospitals.'

Yuy gave Zechs a fierce look as he stood. 'Are you moving or not?'

'I'm going to have to report that you left,' Zechs said, suddenly realising that this was what helplessness felt like. 'This is part of your case.'

'You do what you have to do and I will answer any questions you have once I'm home.' Duo went where Yuy pushed him, bare legs gone to gooseflesh in the cold air, hands stuffed deep in his pockets. Yuy's thick eyebrows were a grim determined line over his unblinking eyes. 'Please,' Duo said simply.

There was clearly no fighting it. Zechs surrendered unhappily. 'At least let me drive. You can't go on the metro like that.'

'Thank you.' Duo freed a hand to squeeze Zechs' wrist. 'Really. Thank you. I'm sorry, I know it's crazy.'

'It's not crazy.' He brushed the edge of a tangle in Duo's hair. 'I'll bring the car around to the side lobby. It will be easier to get out if you stay by the lift and pretend you're not jumping bail.'

Duo grinned fleetingly. 'Thank you.'

'I mean it,' Zechs said, aiming that at Yuy, who was still scowling. 'You stay there until I come in to get you.'

'We will,' Duo said. 'Promise.'

**

'And you just took him home?' Sally repeated in disbelief. 'Zechs, the hell? That's not even in the
realm of protocol!'  

'It was his choice. I didn't have any legal reason to detain him. I'm not happy about it either, Sal.' Zechs scowled at the street three storeys below, now bustling along with civilian traffic well into mid-morning. 'They jammed me up. And they knew they were doing it.'  

'At risk of nagging on this issue, I did tell you it was something to think about before getting involved with Maxwell.'  

'Yes. You did.' He rolled his shoulders, trying to relieve the tension seizing his muscles. He told himself again that Duo hadn't been trying to get him in trouble; if anything, Yuy had seemed to be the one in charge, even if Duo had done the talking. The way Duo had only calmed when Yuy touched him. He didn't like it-- didn't like that he didn't like it, because jealousy was a stupid emotion in the best of circumstances-- but most of all he hadn't liked being politely kicked out the door as soon as he'd dropped Duo at his apartment. And Yuy had known it. Clearly that was one rivalry that wasn't gone the way of the war.  

'I thought maybe they respected my authority,' he said grudgingly. 'Respected my good intentions toward them.'  

'Zechs.' Sally sighed. 'Nobody comes in a neat package. Given past events, I can't honestly tell you that their reactions are unwarranted. They were arrested at that hospital before.'  

He'd forgot that. To be put on trial. Still, though, it didn't excuse everything. 'That was a long time ago.'  

'Not that long. Your tea is ready. Sit down.'  

There were two steaming mugs at her conference table. Not her desk. Zechs sat across the corner from his Director, wrapping his fingers around hot ceramic and trying to wrestle his mood under control. It had been a trying night. Scary night. He hadn't slept. He made himself close his eyes, take ten deep breaths. Sip the tea.  

Sally tapped her fingers on the reader under her fingers. 'I sent Mamba to the bar as soon as you called, but they'd already washed the glasses. We don't have grounds to turn the entire restaurant into a crime scene for forensics, but I doubt we'd get anything anyway. You did the only thing you could, getting him in for testing. The lab will analyse the GHB. No compound is entirely the same. If we ever find a stash to match it to, we can bring that to court.'  

'If. There are far too many “if”s here. Like “if” we arrested Árni Olsen, and someone is still pursuing the same targets, then maybe we arrested the wrong person.'  

'Or just not enough of the wrong persons.'  

'Two perps?' He bobbed his teabag as he thought that through. 'We never did match that IP address to any computer Olsen had access to.'  

'Maybe the kid was cannon fodder. Reckless, obviously. Maybe he was never supposed to approach Relena. He goes off-book, the grand scheme gets derailed. His partner has to carry on alone.'  

'And escalates in retaliation. Stealing Yuy's mail, to show that he knows their secrets. Dosing Maxwell but not actually harming him-- scare them? Shake them up? They're not safe in their own neighbourhoods. L4... why L4?'
To demonstrate that he can reach every part of their lives? Their friends?

'We should move Relena,' he said. 'And get her double back out there.'

'Already done. And Orange and Spider are back with her. If you want to be--'

'I'm not objective,' he said flatly. 'And I'm not effective if it becomes widely known that I'm not just Zechs Merquise, but also Milliardo Peacecraft.'

'You know it won't be a secret forever. Even in Preventers. It's amazing more haven't compared intelligence and put it together.'

'Has anyone come to you with their guesses?'

'Neptune,' Sally said.

'Neptune.' That surprised him. 'She's never indicated--' A thought occurred, and he clenched both hands on his cup. 'I need to say something that's going to sound very ugly, but please listen to what I mean, not the way I'm saying it.'

Sally blinked. 'Okay.'

'I haven't reported it officially because it never seemed to reach that level, but there's been a certain amount of--of--sexual--'

'Yeah.' Sally sighed and sipped her tea. 'You didn't report it, but someone else did. I'm aware of that situation.'

'Who reported it?'

'I won't discuss that. Get to your point.'

He'd been momentarily distracted chasing that idea, that someone would report harassment on his behalf. 'My point being if she knows who I am and she's feeling--spurned in some, any way, and she also has access to resources here--'

'You're right, that is an ugly thing to say.'

'But it might be true.'

'Now who's coming up with the “if”s? If Neptune had a grudge against you, and I don't think she does, then it would still be a big leap to painting targets on the backs of your sister and two Gundam Pilots. And your involvement in this scenario is pretty recent. We had the threats against Relena well before you got involved with Duo.'

It wasn't logical, but he couldn't rid himself of the idea. 'Off-record, then, I still want to look at her.'

'There is no off-record about digging into a fellow Preventer's past on what barely qualifies as suspicion, Zechs. That's a definitive no.' Sally pushed her mug away and stood. 'Mamba will be watching Duo's apartment for a while. Why don't you and Tropic go back to the restaurant and see if you can dig up anything with the staff. And we'll bring in Duo and Heero for interviews.'

'I can interview them at their apartments.' He stood as well. 'If they won't stay in a hospital for fear of being arrested, they're not going to come in to Preventers, either.'

'Can you be objective with them? If you can't be objective about your sister, I can't expect you to
be with them, either.'

That was a hole he'd dug for himself. And it effectively squashed any future opportunities he would have had to maintain his principal standing as the agent in contact with Duo. 'Tropic can do the talking,' he said quietly. 'I'll observe only.'

Sally nodded once. 'All right. Report back this afternoon.'

**

'I can't,' Tropic said. He scraped a pile of folders into his briefcase, sloppily losing a notepad as he did so. 'I have to go.'

'Go where?' Zechs demanded, irritated and then regretting it. 'Emergency, I take it?'

'Personal. Can't be helped. I absolutely need to go.' Tropic locked his case and grabbed his coat off their rack. 'See if Cobra's available. Sorry. I really have to go.'

'Is there anything I can do?'

'No.' Tropic got one arm into his coat and grabbed his case in the free hand. 'I'll try to deal with this as quickly as I can, but don't expect me back until Monday.'

'I'll push back our trip to the Mid-East.'

'Right. Thanks.' Tropic muttered a curse under his breath; there was sweat on his temples, and tight lines around his mouth. Zechs stood aside so Tropic could push past him into the corridor. 'I'll let you know.'

'Good luck,' Zechs said, but it went unanswered. Tropic was already out the door.

'Where's he running off to?'

Neptune. 'Don't know,' Zechs replied. 'He didn't say. Nice dress.'

'You like?' She swirled the ruby-red satin at her knees. 'Glad someone gets to see it. My bastard date cancelled on me. Twice.'

Oddly, the news of her dating put him in a better mood. 'Men,' he said lightly.

Her laugh was startled and real. 'Tell me about it,' she said. 'He leaves me stranded at the opera, and then one of my cases busts open last night. These heels weren't made for all-nighters. And my spare uniform is at the cleaners, so I'm stuck in this thing all day now.'

'You should head home,' he said. He glanced at his watch. Duo had been alone for hours now; and the interviews would take time. 'I'm out the door right now, as soon as I find Cobra.'

'Cobra's home with the 'flu. You need someone with you?'

The offer seemed sincere. He couldn't quite shake that suspicion he'd had, that she might have reason to be continually intruding herself on the case. But twice did not mean continually, and when she'd come to him about Yuy's mail that had also been because all other agents had been
occupied. Maybe it really was a leap to assume she had nefarious intent-- or at least nefarious intent beyond trying to share his company. 'If you don't mind,' he said finally. He looked dubiously at her feet. The strappy shoes she wore didn't seem particularly suited to cold weather. 'Maybe we can find you a pair of boots.'

'I'll be all right. Where are we headed?'

Zechs fetched his own coat and courteously held the door for Neptune. 'Duo Maxwell was attacked last night. He's fine, physically, but it fits the pattern of threats.'

Her expression was serious and level. He thought of Sally's advisement-- that Neptune had guessed who he was-- and wondered if it really cast her in a different light, or if he was only imagining it. But even if she had put herself in the way of accompanying him again, at the moment he was simply glad to be moving. If there was more to deal with later, he would deal with it.

'Fill me in,' Neptune said.

**

Duo answered the door looking rougher than Zechs had ever seen him. There were dark circles under his eyes, his skin was sallow, his hair sloppily caught in a crooked tail. He was wrapped in a bulky sweater from neck to fingertip, but the heat in the apartment behind him still slammed Zechs like a wall as soon as the door let it out.

'Go sit down,' Zechs said, and gave him a little shove back inside. He gestured for Neptune to follow, and swept the stairwell with one last look before shut the door. 'Agent Neptune,' he introduced her briefly. 'I thought you'd be lying down.'

' Weird dreams.' Duo flopped backward onto his couch and pulled a quilt over his legs. 'You're a sight for sore eyes. Literally sore. I feel like I've been beaten with hammers. Interesting story, that happened once, so when I say that I do know what I'm talking about.'

'You were supposed to hydrate.' Neptune was checking the rooms, and Zechs left her to it. He fetched a tumbler from the cabinet and filled it from the pitcher in the refrigerator. 'Do you want tea? Something decaffeinated?'

'I only have black.' Duo took the water at least, and suffered Zechs putting the back of his hand to forehead and cheek. Light fever, but not warm enough to be dangerous. Zechs left a quick caress behind as Neptune returned from casing the apartment. 'Any leads?' Duo asked them.

'Nothing we can discuss,' Neptune answered briskly. 'Agent Wind has filled me in on events last night. How you feeling, aside from sore? Memories coming back?'

'Not really. You can sit anywhere.' Duo drank half his glass in small sips while both Preventers took seats on the bar stools. 'I sort of recall the restaurant. But not really anything specific.'

'No faces? No sense of anything wrong, out of place?' Neptune crossed her long legs, her sheer dark stockings catching the lamplight. Duo gave her a long look, breaking into a slow grin. She smirked back at him. Zechs turned his suddenly stiff neck elsewhere.

'No,' Duo said belatedly. 'I can see why they send you. I almost want to answer yes, just to keep
you talking.'

'We all use our God-given talents.' Neptune none-too-casually flipped her hair over her shoulder, fanning it with her hand so that it swung prettily. But then she laughed. 'And if I'm not mistaken, my God-given talents aren't of the least interest to someone with your tastes.'

'I can still appreciate fine art when I see it.' Duo rubbed his eyes. 'You're sassy. I like it. Zechs, bring her next time.'

'Back to the subject at hand,' Zechs reminded him gently. 'Anything you can give us will help. What about earlier in the day? On the metro to the bar? Do you remember anything strange?'

'It was a normal day. Heavy workload, and everyone was in a shitty mood, and the fucking telly. On the metro, I don't know. I don't think so. Past rush hour, I think I would notice anyone obviously following me. Any sense of this just being a crime of opportunity? Or maybe the drink was supposed to go to some hot chick-- Fuck.' Duo rubbed his face again. 'Fuck, I forgot to call my boss. Shit. I was supposed to be in early today--'

'I called,' Zechs said. 'I told her you were in hospital.'

Duo reluctantly accepted that. 'She didn't sack me?'

'No, she didn't.'

'But you told her that you're a Preventer? So she knows I'm in hospital and there's some kind of official thing going on. Like maybe an official bad thing.' Duo chewed his thumbnail. 'This is not good. I should call her.'

'If there's a problem, we could talk with her again,' Neptune offered. 'Assure her it's not anything you've done.'

'She's got a one-strike policy. She employs a lot of ex-cons. One strike and you're done. Fuck.' Duo set his water on the table with a heavy clunk. 'Fuck. I don't know. What did I do while I was drugged?'

Zechs delicately sidestepped that. 'If you feel up to it, maybe you could go in this afternoon. We can drive you.'

'That's true. That's a good idea.' Duo tucked himself deeper into his quilt, watching both of them with narrowed eyes. 'So you think this crap is all related? Heero and Relena and all of that? Did you check on that kid, Pargan's grandson?'

'He was at home with Pargan. At least that's what Pargan claims. But we do know he didn't cross the border anywhere, didn't fly out from the airport. It couldn't have been him.'

'So this was just a prank.'

'I don't think so.'

'How could it be anything else? Look, you eliminated your one guy. And you were with me the whole episode, and nothing happened, right? Except for whatever embarrassing thing I did that you won't tell me about. So everything is safe except for my dignity. And I'm done freaking out about the hospital thing, so. Did you check on other customers? Maybe someone else got dosed too.'

'We put out a medical alert to hospitals and clinics, but most of the time people don't realise they've
ingested something,' Neptune said. 'They'll wake up in the morning with no idea anything ever happened. We got the names of everyone who paid credit last night, but that doesn't account for everyone physically there.'

'And you don't have the manpower to interview a couple hundred people anyway.'

'No,' Zechs said honestly. 'But we do think it's related. And I don't think this is the last thing that will happen, either. If we don't catch whoever's responsible.'

'This kind of minor crap goes on until the doer runs out of steam or finds another celebrity to spook. The first place Heero and I lived, we had bricks through the window, paint on the door. Someone tracked our landline and posted it online and we got all kinds of nasty calls. When we moved, it died down. This probably will, too.'

'It's good that you're not letting it scare you,' Neptune said diplomatically. 'But the reality is that we do need to catch this person. In case the minor crap becomes major crap.'

Duo let his head fall back. Neptune gave Zechs a shooing motion, indicating, he supposed, that he should push harder. But if Duo didn't remember anything unusual, there wasn't much more to say. 'Do you know if Yuy is at his apartment?' he asked eventually.

'Heero's always at his apartment,' Duo said. 'You going there next?'

'Yes. After we drop you off at work.'

'I don't know.'

That admission must have cost. Duo would have given Treize Khushrenada a run for the money in a race to make firm decisions. Duo was putting on a show, that was what that meant. Pretending to be fine when he wasn't. And maybe pretending not to be worried when he was. If he'd been harassed like this before, for who knew how long, his nerves would be strung to the limit. And his fists were clenched in the quilt like they might shake if he let go.

'Neptune can cover Yuy,' Zechs said. He nodded rigidly to Neptune's surprise. 'I'll stay here with you until you decide. We can get a cab if you decide you want to go in.'

'Really?' Duo looked up hopefully. 'That doesn't mess you up?'

'Not at all.'

'Thanks. Thanks, that helps. That helps a lot.'

'Are you sure about this?' Neptune asked in a low murmur.

'I might get more out of him in private.' He brought her by the elbow to standing, and turned her toward the door. The chill in the hall was abrupt after the warmth of Duo's apartment, and he shrugged his coat closed. 'Do you mind doing Yuy's interview alone?'

'I don't mind, no.' Neptune pursed her lips, arms folded, fingers tapping on her elbows. 'So we're just not going to talk about the weird signals in there?'

'What weird signals?'

She gave him exactly the same eyebrow-arched stare that Sally always did. 'Huh,' was all she said. 'I'll let you know how it goes with Yuy, I guess.'
'Be respectful with him.'

'Oh, yes sir, indeed I shall.' She rolled her eyes at him. 'See you back at the office.'

He latched Duo's door behind him as he went in again. He stood leaning on it, wondering if he'd just done the right thing. The entire point of bringing Neptune with him had been to let her do the questions while he observed-- but if he was honest with himself, the point had really been just to have an excuse to be back here with Duo. Who was watching him, quiet and intense, letting him stand there in silence in his own thoughts.

'It takes thirty seconds for the caffeine to leave the teabag,' Zechs said. 'I can make you that tea with the second steeping.'

'You're so funny.' A frown creased Duo's forehead. 'I don't get you even a little bit, sometimes.'

'Stay in today. I'll ring your supervisor. I'll clear it up with her.' He left the door, to fill the electric kettle, take a mug from the tree. 'Why don't you go back to bed.'

'Zechs. Really. What did I do when I was drugged?'

He concentrated on the pantry, nudging spices and boxed pasta aside in the search for tea. 'You were... somewhat amorous.'

'Oh.'

His neck was hot. He opened his coat back up. 'Nothing to be embarrassed of. We didn't-- do-- anything.'

'I know you wouldn't take advantage of me.' Duo coughed, more a sound of a throat clearing, a noise to fill the pause. 'Think I will lie down. You'll bring in the tea?'

'Of course.'

'Take off your coat.' He peeked, and saw Duo looking at him still. 'Stay a while,' Duo said, and left the couch for the bedroom.

When he followed Duo in a minute later with the steaming tea, he found the lights off, the blinds drawn over the window. 'Are you asleep?' he whispered, setting the tea on a coaster on the bedside table.

'In like ninety seconds?' Duo rolled toward him. 'I told you take your coat off. Put it on the chair there. And your shoes.'

He shucked his coat and tucked his loafers under the edge of the chair. 'All right.'

'Now walk approximately four feet back to the bed.'

He was smiling as he arrived in place. 'Now what?'

'Mount 'em, stud.'

'Duo.' He curled his fingers around Duo's duvet-covered toes. 'Are you sure?'

'Maybe not as sure as when I'm under the influence. But pretty sure, yeah.'

He allowed himself to sit on the edge of the bed. 'We don't have to.'
'What, ever? I'm pretty sure we're going to get dirty at some point. Near future, maybe. Or now.'

He bent to kiss Duo. Duo threaded a hand into his hair, stroking the back of his neck. Zechs rested on an elbow, Duo's ribcage rising and falling under his palm. Even if things hadn't gone sour the night before, it hadn't had this quality, this intimacy. This was better. Right.

'Now you kiss me again,' Duo said.

'You feel up to it?'

'Free day, dashing hero boyfriend who makes tea. Try to stop me.'

He was still smiling when Duo kissed him again. Duo kicked back the sheet for him. Yes. Much better than in the car. Duo's tee-shirt folded back, revealing hot skin, a flat taut belly that indented under his lips. He kissed his way up Duo's chest, guided by Duo's tugs at his hair to a silky nipple. He licked it until it hardened, enjoying the way Duo's breath caught. He left a swipe on Duo's jaw with the broadside of his tongue and kissed him deeply.

'God, you have an amazing body.' Duo was tentative at first, but he grew bolder as they shed their shirts. 'Your shoulders are like-- I want to bite them. And your butt, I'm kind of a butt guy anyway, but you have the most amazing--'

He sucked lightly at Duo's sternum. 'For me, it's your legs.' He stroked Duo from thigh to ankle, and tucked the leg up around his hip. 'You were right. This is cinematic.'

'What? Cinematic?'

'Uh-- never mind.' He kissed Duo silent. Duo obliged without any argument. And busied himself with the zip of Zechs' trousers. He went on his back when Duo nudged him over, and then it was Duo's turn to map out his chest with lips and mischievous nips of his teeth. Each touch seemed to go straight to his groin-- no accident, with Duo massaging him there. He tried to muster up a protest when Duo peeled away his trousers and undershorts, but if Duo was still suffering any indecision, it wasn't about the direction of their first time in bed. Duo made a fist around him, and Zechs dropped his head back to the pillow, suddenly nerveless. That was nothing to the moment Duo's tongue circled the tip of his cock. He made some kind of grunted encouragement-- he thought-- and Duo closed his mouth over--

The sharp knock at the door startled him out of his reverie. 'Were you expecting someone?'

'No, ignore it and they'll go away.' Duo made an attempt at swallowing him. Zechs clutched Duo's shoulder, biting back a groan.

Another knock. And then the sound of a key in the latch.

Duo dove off the bed. Zechs was a second behind him, in time to catch his shirt in his face. He hurriedly zipped his trousers and shoved his arms into his shirt. Duo grabbed something out of the bedside table, something Zechs was pretty sure was a gun Duo was in no wise authorised to have, and then Duo was out the door. Zechs ripped his own weapon out of his coat and followed him just a step later.

Heero Yuy stood at the door. Duo came to an abrupt halt, and he dropped his gun to his side. Zechs cautiously mimicked him.

'There's a Preventer watching your apartment,' Yuy said. 'What were you doing that you didn't answer the door?'
'Fucking,' Duo said. 'Why didn't you wait for me to answer, as any reasonable person does?'

Yuy actually looked offended by that. 'I waited between knocks. You didn't answer. It was *reasonable* to assume you were in danger or were ill and unable to respond for yourself. Or have him answer for you.'

Zechs flushed. Knowing his face was flaming, he tried to glare Yuy down, but that was a losing battle.

'Reasonable,' Duo repeated. 'Heero, hello, I'm in my own apartment. Pretty safe in here. That is so not why I let you keep that key. What's that?'

Yuy dropped the duffel he was holding. 'You were attacked last night. I'm moving back in.'

Duo was set aback by that. Zechs blinked.

'How recently did you check your window locks?'

Duo shook himself. 'Heero. Seriously. Whatever that crap last night was, it doesn't exactly rise to the level of--'

'I disagree. You were drugged. You could have been assaulted. Any reasonable person would construe that as an attack. We've spent years anticipating something like this. I'm not leaving you alone.'

That was the longest speech Zechs had ever heard out of Yuy. He looked expectantly at Duo, waiting for the witty riposte. But there was none. Duo stood chewing his lower lip, unusually troubled, his fingers twisting in the hem of his tee shirt.

'I'm moving back in,' Yuy said.

Duo inhaled deeply. 'Okay. If you think that's best.'

'Yes.'

Zechs locked the safety on his gun and tucked it into his pocket. 'Duo, a word?'

'I'm here now,' Yuy told him directly. 'You can go. Duo and I have work to do.'

'Duo,' he insisted. 'May I please have a word with you.'

Duo shoved his hands deep into his pockets. 'Maybe it would be best if, uh, you gave us some time. I'm sorry. About the timing-- the-- interruption part. Maybe we can, like, another time. Later.'

He couldn't think of a single thing to say to that. The sheer disbelief froze his tongue.

'I'm sorry,' Duo said. 'Jesus. Uh-- I'm just really sorry.'

Yuy opened the door and stood by it. Zechs set his jaw. He went back to the bedroom for his coat and shoes. Duo was shifting back and forth on bare feet when he returned. Zechs tried to kiss him, but Duo turned his head so that Zechs only got his cheek.

'I'll call you,' Zechs said grimly.

'Sorry.' Duo avoided his eyes. 'Yeah. Okay.'
Yuy shut the door after him. The slide and lock of the latch had a definite tone of finality.
'Hey.' Sally leaned on his cubicle wall. 'You look like you need about a billion years on vacation.'

Zechs removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. 'Something like. What's up?'

'Do you have time to process something through Intell for me?' She held up a thick folder. 'I need someone to babysit it while the techs work it over. It's a chain of custody issue.'

'I have the time.'

'Thanks.' She nodded at the empty desk. 'Tropic still out?'

'Wherever he ran off to, yes. He didn't file for leave?'

'He did, but you know what he's like. I got the bare bones of it, not the full story. He said he'd be back when he was back.' Sally quirked a smile. 'Still working out with him?'

'If you're asking have we bonded, I can't say particularly. Professionally, it seems fine.'

'I guess it all depends on whether you want permanent posting in Brussels.' Sally moved to take Tropic's chair, swinging it to face Zechs. 'We've got the room for you. Two of our trainees are going to ship out for Southeast Asia in a month, and I want Hydra's language skills at work in North America. But I do want at least ten agents here full-time. If that doesn't tempt you, I can talk promotion potential. I'm losing my Deputy. And you know I want you in Admin.'

'I'm not right for Admin, Sally. I think we both know that.' He tapped the edge of his keyboard, and flattened his hand over the buttons. 'I don't know about permanent posting.'

"No? I thought maybe with Duo..."

Zechs looked hard at his screen. 'I don't know if that's going to work out.'

'Really?' That seemed to take her by surprise. 'Because of the other night? I grant their behaviour wasn't terrific--' 

'What's the situation between Yuy and Duo?'

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth. 'I wondered if you'd ever ask me that.' He opened his computer. 'Yuy moved back in. And for the first time since I've met him Duo had nothing to say. So I think maybe I need to ask.'

'They're close. If you're asking if there's a romantic connection, no evidence I've ever seen. If anything, Heero's proved he's pretty attached to Relena.'

Zechs waved that off. 'There's something not normal about their relationship. “Close” doesn't cover it. Co-dependent or-- I don't know. I swear to you, Yuy looked at me cross-wise and Duo nearly broke up with me on the spot. Am I supposed to wait for him to call? Accept that I'm at best a third wheel and be grateful if I'm allowed to participate?'

'Whatever it is, I'm pretty sure you won't find out by sitting around the office on Saturday complaining to me about it.' Sally propped her chin on her hand. 'Can I just say for the record that I think Duo's been very good for you? And I don't doubt you've been good for him. If that's worth
fighting for, then I know you don't have a problem with fighting.'

He rolled his fist on the edge of his desk. 'You're right. I know. I'm just--'

'Pissed off. Hurt. You wanted him to choose you first. Ego just a little bruised that he didn't.'

'Yes,' he said.

'So go remind him why he should've.' Sally stood and tucked Tropic's chair away. 'I'll get someone else to deal with the file. Take the occasional day off, Zechs. Life is short.'

'Same to you.' Zechs tapped his fist five more times, and then he stood himself. Sally was right about one thing. He hadn't ever yielded the field to Heero Yuy, and now was not the time to start. He grabbed his coat and scarf from their hangers and headed for the door.

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The address Duo had given him took him across town on the metro to a small building that seemed to be split between an off-license on the lower level and a professional place above denoted by a single sign in the window: the International Jewish Centre of Brussels. There were balloons floating listlessly from the bars of the pavement-side iron fence. Zechs trailed his fingers over the ribbon of one as he climbed the steps.

Yuy sat at the top, gathering a dusting of snow on his shoulders, his knit cap pulled low over scowling eyes. Zechs halted when their heads were at equal height and pocketed his own hands. Yuy's glower deepened.

'I would have thought you could watch him better from inside,' Zechs said.

'This is the only exit.'

'Bit of a fire hazard.' Zechs craned his neck to look through a first-storey window. He heard the faint sound of applause. 'If you're auditioning for resident gargoyle, you should really perch closer to the roof.'

Yuy came abruptly to his feet. 'Why are you here.'

'To demonstrate to you that I will not be so easily scared off.' He put on his most aloof smile, just to watch Yuy's jaw clench. 'I think you needed a little reminder of my tenacity.'

A little puff of steam was the only evidence of Yuy's silent dismissal of him. He swept the street, far right to far left, and arrived back on Zechs harder and colder.

'And to warn you,' Zechs said then. 'Because I think you need to be reminded of this, too. If you cut him off from everyone else, then you had better be willing to commit to him for the rest of your life. He doesn't deserve to be left hanging when you get tired of this game.'

'You don't know what you're talking about,' Yuy retorted, dangerously soft.

'I know he stayed for you. That what he's been through here he did for you. You owe him return on that.'
'How do you know it wasn't owed to me?'

'Then be friend enough to call it evens and let him have a life of his own.' He inclined his head, and mounted the last four stairs. 'Think about it,' he suggested, and stepped around Yuy to push open the stairwell door.

There was a lone security camera, aimed directly at the entrance. He climbed to the landing and followed more balloons to more security, this time a barred door with a buzzer. But the door was propped open by a brick in the jamb. Zechs let himself in, courteously wiping his feet on the mat before he entered.

There were small rooms along the corridor, one some kind of office, another a children's creche, unstaffed and dark. A little shelf-lined room seemed to be a library, stocked with plenty of chairs. But a flush of applause told him to keep walking. He ducked through another pair of doors, and found himself in a hall filled with tables of seated people who were all clapping for a speaker at a podium in the front.

Duo was at a buffet along the back wall, intent on the course of the ceremony ahead. Unnoticed in the middle of the speech, Zechs was able to slip around the crowd and join him. He got right to Duo's side before Duo sensed him there, and squeezed Duo's shoulder as he jumped.

'You came!' Duo's face lit, smile transforming him from pale and tired to a handsome, happy young man. Zechs returned the grin, and bent to kiss Duo's temple. 'Wouldn't miss it,' he whispered.

For the first time, he'd succeeded in making Duo blush. Duo pressed his mitted hands to his red cheeks. 'I'm so sorry,' he said urgently. 'About last night. I didn't mean to-- I don't even know what I was thinking, except you left and I was thinking how I'm such a shithead for just doing it like that, and you left your watch and I was worried I would never see you again to get it back to you--'

'Don't worry about that.' He got in another kiss, discreetly pretending to just be shedding his coat in the warm hall. 'May I help with any of the work?'

'No, I'm done with my bit, except for taking stuff back to the kitchen for clean-up. Hey, you hungry? There's like nine billion chicken breasts left. We ran out of vegetarian.'

'Maybe later.' He tugged the hem of a hair net down over Duo's ponytail where it had ruched upward. 'I like the look.'

'Chic, right.' Duo pulled it off. 'Zechs-- I really am sorry.'

'We'll talk about it later,' Zechs promised him, and promised himself. 'But I am not leaving.'

He did end out helping in the kitchen, stationed at the sink to rinse out the aluminium platters as they piled in. Duo threw him bright-eyed grins every time he came back with a new platter, showed him how to load the industrial washer. They shared a chocolate mousse, just standing close together, hands tucked out of sight but wrapped tight. Thinking of Yuy stranded out on the cold steps outside, Zechs felt a bit smug. Duo wasn't the only one who liked to win.

'Oh, that's Pieter getting up,' Duo said then. 'I want to hear him speak. You mind?'

'Not at all.' He held the kitchen door for Duo, and then the rest of the kitchen volunteers, who were all eagerly lining up along the back wall. Zechs tucked himself in beside Duo, politely clapping for the mousy young woman reading an introduction in Dutch and then French. She ended in English.

'It is my great honour to introduce to you Barrister Pieter Van den Broeck. Pieter's dedication to
Small Arms is known to all of us here and needs no further detail. Please welcome the President of our organisation, Mister Van den Broeck.'

Duo's applause was enthusiastic. So was that of everyone else, and it lasted well after the tall, dark-skinned Belgian rose to the podium. Finally Van den Broeck succeeded in hushing the crowd, many of whom had risen for him. Zechs kicked a heel back against the wall, crossing his arms loosely.

'Good morning, friends and family,' Van den Broeck said in heavily accented English. 'Thank you all for giving up a lovely Saturday for our annual luncheon. To celebrate together our accomplishments, to welcome our new members, and to mourn those who pass away-- we get so few opportunities as a community, and yet that is what we are, a community united in common purpose, in love.'

'He's big on love,' Duo whispered to him. 'A little hippy-dippy sometimes, but he means it. Straight from the soul.'

'In brief,' Van den Broeck went on. 'As we near Christmas, we are reminded yet again that civility is always the first casualty of war. In the year 195 we were approaching a conflict so drastic that it involved great swaths of humanity, nations with no geographic connection, no political connection except for opposition to each other's self-determination. But this room is not for questions of geopolitics. This room is where we speak of the unspeakables. Where we remember that the most barbarous form of incivility in our world is not war, but war that exploits those it ostensibly protects: the children. Children as young as seven are pressed into service for government forces, armed resistance groups, and local militias. Many children carry guns. Many children witness atrocities of war, and many children commit them. You serve as porters, as security, as labourers, as decoys and human shields, as camp help, as spies, as sexual slaves. This untold misery is the great evil of our time, the great shame that we have not yet wiped from existence. We have peace, but until we have eradicated the child soldier, that peace is only a mockery.'

'I do not believe in lost generations,' Van den Broeck said. 'I do not believe in even one lost child. I do not believe that this evil which afflicts our world has the power to end even one child's worth and potential. I do not accept words like "emotionally crippled" or "damaged for life" or "socially unacceptable". These words suffocate hope. But I believe in hope. Many of the young faces I see here have terrible stories to tell. A survivor who turns that past pain into present triumph is a triumph of hope. There are three hundred thousand child soldiers. I hope our work will end one day. But until that time, Small Arms will name that evil, expose its weaknesses, its human faults, and together we will save each other, one child at a time. Thank you for your support, and please enjoy the holidays.'

Zechs joined the rest of the applause, smiling at Duo to cover his ambivalence. War was a darker thing than most would ever know, he granted that-- but to blanket it with a word like 'evil' obviated both the necessity and the outcome of war. He wasn't the passionate philosopher that Treize had been, but he had agreed with Treize that some conflicts couldn't be ended until the alternative became so undesirable that it couldn't be contemplated. And in his admittedly twisted use of the Zero System, he'd done his part to make war as ugly as possible. Relena's Pacifists had succeeded in part because Oz, the Gundams, White Fang had all brought war to such a wretchedly grand scale that it threatened to destroy everything and everyone if not stopped.

He'd thought, anyway. 'Three hundred thousand?' he asked Duo. 'Is that number accurate?'

'You're the Preventer,' Duo answered. 'You tell me.' He cocked his head. 'Hey-- Pieter's coming over. If you want to bail, you've got about five seconds.'
Less than that, and Zechs lost the chance to decide. Duo stepped in front of him, almost a protective gesture, but it was swallowed up into a warm embrace from Van den Broeck. ‘And how are you, my young friend?’ the older man asked him. ‘Did you eat? I never saw you sit.’

‘I ate. Pieter, this is--’

‘Yes. I saw you standing back here.’ The smile fell off Van den Broeck’s face. Zechs straightened in response. ‘Your choice of guests surprises me, Duo.’

Ah. Odd to have it happen here, among civilians, but it did happen, once in a very long while. Neptune wasn’t the only one who could compare pictures and press reports. Zechs neutrally extended his hand. ‘My name is Zechs Merquise, sir.’

‘I know very well who you are, sir. Many of the people here are here today because of you.’

‘That’s not fair,’ Duo said. ‘Or at least the same thing could be said about me.’

Van den Broeck broke their stare to look at Duo. ‘I take your point,’ he conceded finally. ‘And I’m breaking my own rule about pre-judging.’

‘Yes,’ Duo said bluntly. ‘And killing the mood. And making me into a liar. I told Zechs how great you are and now he won’t believe me.’

‘Not at all.’ Zechs held out his hand again, and this time Van den Broeck took it, gripping him firmly. ‘I would be-- interested-- in learning more about Small Arms.’

‘I would be more than happy to answer questions. Not least because I want my favourite to keep his high opinion of me.’ Van den Broeck looped a long arm over Duo’s shoulders as Duo grinned cheekily at him. ‘Come, let me treat you to a drink. We don’t bring alcohol on the premises out of respect for our hosts, but I want a good stiff brandy.’

‘Zechs?’ Duo asked. ‘Oh-- Heero’s outside. Can he come?’

Oh, that would not end well. ‘Of course,’ Zechs said lamely.

They did collect Yuy, who trailed after the three of them with a permanent frown stamped on his face and a decidedly shift-eyed habit of looking into all alleys. Duo and Van den Broeck engaged in an exchange of news about mutual acquaintances that Zechs did not know, and he only kept pace with them because he wanted to prove to Yuy that he belonged there. There was a small café only a few blocks’ walk from the Jewish Centre; Zechs got to the front of the queue to hold the door for their party. Van den Broeck wove a quick path through the lunch crowd for a round table in back--a diplomatic choice, since it enabled both Yuy and Zechs to claim a side of Duo, while Van den Broeck overlooked the byplay. Duo rolled his eyes, though.

‘Brandy all around?’ Van den Broeck asked them. He signaled the bar server. ‘Mr Yuy, you look well.’

Yuy’s nod was less begrudging than Zechs expected. ‘Duo said fundraising was good this year.’

‘Yes, with a generous donation from Sanq, as always.’

Zechs looked sharp at that. ‘Relena Peacecraft is one of your donors?’

‘You know Relena,’ Duo said. ‘Never met a cause she didn’t like. She donates to a bunch of groups like Small Arms.’
'She's a fine young woman,' Van den Broeck said. 'And the kind of leader we all prayed for. Intelligent, compassionate, extremely capable. But I'm sure you're aware of that, Mister...'

'Merquise,' Zechs said. 'Yes. So I've heard.'

'You're doing it again, Pieter,' Duo interrupted. 'I didn't bring my boyfriend to meet you so you could rip him a new one. The one he's got is just fine.'

'Boyfriend?' Van den Broeck managed a smile, but Zechs was certain for a second he'd seen real concern there. 'Congratulations are in order.'

'I don't know if we need to be congratulated, but yeah.' Duo fiddled with the edge of his placemat. 'A couple of months now, if you don't count all the dancing at the front end.'

'Dancing?'

'I had to work to convince him.' Duo smirked slyly at Zechs. 'Those are our drinks, I think. Heero, help me?'

No time to object to being abandoned, then. Zechs watched them go. He checked his watch, straightened the leg of his trouser over his boot. Looked at Van den Broeck looking at him.

'For Duo's sake,' Van den Broeck said, 'it's a good thing you came today. I hope it gives you some idea what you're getting into.'

'Getting into?'

'Should I say affecting the tide? Duo's come a long way since I first met him. I would be very distressed to see him regress because of inappropriate contacts.'

Zechs took an impatient inhale. 'I take it I'm the inappropriate contact? First of all, sir, I believe Duo would be more than sensible to any problems-- he's also intelligent and extremely capable. Secondly, whatever I have done in another time, I've taken every step possible to ameliorate my--depts. I serve in Preventers, I live very quietly, and I want nothing for Duo but happiness.'

'I don't speak of your “depts”. Duo is correct in that I have no place to stand in judgment.' Van den Broeck laced his large fingers, pale on the underside, a burnished black walnut at the knuckles. 'I speak more broadly. Your inescapable involvement in the war.'

'This is a conversation I've already had privately with Duo.'

'I didn't leave you alone to argue.' Duo was back, plunking down into his seat so that it rattled. He put a tumbler in front of Zechs and another in front of Van den Broeck; Yuy had his own and Duo's. 'Keep it surfacy. Cheers.'

'Cheers,' they echoed, all three with less enthusiasm than Duo. Zechs lifted the glass to his lips, just enough to taste it. Yuy didn't even do that much. Duo sighed, and dropped to his elbows on the table.

'Out in the open?' he said. 'I guess originally I wanted you to be there not just because it's important to me, but because I wanted to know if it would make you think differently about me. And us, and yourself.'

So much for the surface of the thing. Zechs cupped both hands around his brandy. 'I-- don't know yet.'
'I know it's a lot to think about. It's not, like, it's not blame. I see it more like-- context. Like it just puts everything in context for me. Because I was always so focussed on this cosmic inevitability in my life. I thought everything led to me becoming a Gundam Pilot because that was the only way to retaliate for what had happened to get me there. Do you know I was actually glad about the Barton Rebellion? Because I'd started to figure out I wasn't going to fit in very well to a world that didn't make or need Gundam Pilots.'

Yuy's eyes dropped. Zechs had to keep his own level with an effort.

'Coerced participation in military conflict only accounts for a third of children in war,' Van den Broeck said. 'Children who grow up in war zones often choose the life as a seemingly-positive alternative to oppression and powerlessness. And what of the standing armies of Alliance and OZ that recruited children as young as thirteen?'

'The Academy was hardly the same as a standing army,' Zechs interrupted, stung by that.

'Is there really a moral difference between a boy recruited in the bush and a boy indoctrinated with the nobility of war in a citadel? Is it righteous just because a government supports it? Because the children of OZ were pampered and rich when they were sent to battle?'

'Please, I think the world has had enough of--'

'Yes, it has. Which is why all standing armies were disbanded and only Preventers has a mandate to use military force. The deception is that violence can never solve the effects of violence, no matter how well-meaning.' He patted Duo's shoulder. 'The real answer is to find a way to re-interpret those needs in a peaceful context. Provide the same belonging, the same sense of purpose.'

'What purpose?' Yuy said suddenly. 'You tell me what purpose there is in the way we live now.'

'Heero,' Duo began.

'It's bull, Duo.' Yuy stood. 'Thanks for the drink. I'll wait outside for you.'

'Don't fucking walk outside, Heero. We'll talk about something else.'

'No, Duo!' Yuy slammed his chair back to the table and was gone before it hit the wood.

'Fuck,' Duo said. But when Zechs pressed his wrist, he sank back into his seat.

'Let him go,' Van den Broeck agreed quietly. 'I forgot how distressing he finds such talk.'

'Is he really wrong?' Zechs pressed Duo's wrist again as Duo opened his mouth to protest. 'Maybe you don't believe in emotional cripples, Mr Van den Broeck, but you have to admit that Heero is troubled.'

Duo moved his hand away. 'Don't trash him.'

'I'm not trashing him. I'm just speaking the obvious. He feels trapped, and there's nothing to tell him he isn't. He felt threatened by you being of a different opinion, Duo. Maybe Preventers--'

'No, Jesus. Zechs.' Duo drank from his brandy, but his mouth was a thin line now that spoke of rising temper. 'He didn't feel threatened, he just doesn't agree and it frustrates him. I'm frustrated too, at the moment. This isn't going how I planned.'

Nor for Zechs. Van den Broeck didn't look much thrilled, either.
Pieter, thanks for the drink. I think the luncheon went really well. Duo gave his friend a quick one-armed embrace. 'Zechs, whenever you're ready, I'll be out with Heero.' He finished his drink with a quick swallow, grabbed his coat, and went outside. The bell on the door clanged with his exit.

Van den Broeck threw up his hands. 'So much for holiday cheer.'

'May I propose a little information sharing?' Zechs asked him directly. 'On the assumption that neither of us should operate in the dark about those two.'

The older man regarded him with pursed lips, swirling his brandy slowly. 'You surprise me. Information about what?'

'Off the record, and without having sought Duo's permission to discuss this, there's been an ongoing security problem. Preventers received verbal and written threats against Relena Peacecraft, and by extension, or perhaps equally against, Duo and Yuy. We thought we apprehended the person threatening them, but there's been other incidents. One of them just Thursday night. Because of what happened Thursday, Yuy felt it necessary to move back in with Duo.'

'They're living together again?' Van den Broeck sat forward. 'But they were doing so well.'

'Please tell me about it.'

'As Duo's boyfriend, or as a Preventer agent?'

'Mostly the first,' Zechs said. 'But if it's important, then also the latter. If anyone has the means to really evaluate their relationship, it seems it would be you, and I want to know.'

The Belgian sighed deeply. He emptied Yuy's glass into his own, and took two small sips. 'You know I was their lawyer?'

'Duo told me.'

'Then you have some sense of the travesty it was. Two very young boys, Heero critically injured. There was all this ridiculous talk of example-making. What example? Not mercy. Not common sense. The other Gundam Pilots had escaped to the Colonies, which of course would not extradite them if the ESUN would not promise not to indict. And the charges, Mr Merquise-- absurdities. Murder. They wanted to call it murder, what the boys had done, because the Gundams were never officially more than "enemy militants". Homegrown insurrection has no legal protection under the Geneva Convention, you understand? Our entire universe at war and the only people to be brought to criminal trial are those two boys? Van den Broeck waved a hand toward the door. 'The Barton girl, too young, too obviously a puppet, and Dekim Barton dead already. Lady Une of course had diplomatic immunity by then, had made herself invaluable to the new government by providing intelligence, by creating the Preventers, and she had the fallback of mental illness to excuse her grosser acts. Treize Khushrenada, dead at Libra, Milliardo Peacecraft--' He gave Zechs a very level look. 'Disappeared, presumed dead at Libra. Who was left to punish?'

'Duo said that you cleared them by claiming they were child soldiers, unaccountable for their actions.'

'Not unaccountable, no. Not unaccountable. But I did argue that the charge of murder could not apply, that the proposed term of imprisonment should not apply, and that there was no morality in using the laws that should have protected these young men from ever engaging in battle to punish them for having done so. They are both very clear on the fact that they chose to pilot the Gundams.
They maintain that very strongly. But those were not choices made in a vacuum. Duo is an orphan from a greatly impoverished colony; Heero had almost no normal socialisation until his teenage years. These are conditions that create child soldiers. And what of the adults who built the Gundams? The adults who gave them to children to pilot? He considered Zechs, his fingernails tapping lightly against his glass. 'Their relationship, yes. That they would die for each other, given. I found them each highly dependent on the other. So I was very glad when Heero found a place of his own. I am not so glad to hear they live together again. It reinforces a siege mentality-- them against a world which will hunt and hurt them. I make no mistake that the world may do exactly that, but it is still unhealthy. If they only define their identity by what they used to be, they will only go as far forward as they can get while looking over their shoulders, do you understand me?'

He did. He did, actually. He'd come to a similar reasoning on Mars, searching for his own way forward. He'd only achieved internal peace by letting go of Milliardo. Because Milliardo had been the child inside of him-- the child who was orphaned in a war and devoted himself totally to vengeance-- and in the end, he'd had to leave that child behind him on the Red Planet.

Van den Broeck swallowed the last of his brandy. 'So you see why I do not greet the news of your relationship with Duo as a happy thing.'

Zechs blinked out of his thoughts. 'Not really. Why wouldn't it be--?'

'Child soldiers who cannot easily rehabilitate and reintegrate often return to the only place they've ever felt wanted. To other soldiers. Duo and Heero together are maybe inseparable, as long as they are legally restricted in a place where neither feels they belong. But add a third-- add a you, do you follow me, add someone of your stature, your appeal-- and I do not mean the appeal of your person, forgive me, but of your history, your air.'

Because the military complex bred men of a certain mould. Often Zechs could identify a military man simply by posture, knowing nothing else about him. 'I'm not exactly convinced yet that I should end our relationship.'

'End it or not, that's a decision for you to make mutually. But allow me to be concerned-- I've seen this play far too many times not to know the ending.'

Zechs set his jaw. 'Vague threats, sir, and vaguer predictions of doom. I think you're selling us both short.'

'Well. We have exchanged information. Now we do what?'

He stood. 'Keep them from getting locked in their own heads,' he said. 'Thank you for the drink, Mr Van den Broeck. Happy Christmas.'

They were sitting on the front step, shoulders touching, heads bent over something. Zechs crouched down on Duo's side. The phone, playing a game together. Both of them looked at up him as one.

Zechs held out a wool scarf. 'Yours, I believe,' he said to Yuy. 'You left it inside.'

'You better not lose that,' Duo told him. 'I got you that for Christmas two years ago. It's a good scarf.'

Yuy took it so that it slid from Zechs' fingers. 'I didn't lose it.'

'Where's Pieter?' Duo asked.
'Off to a meeting. I was thinking I'd walk the two of you home. Make sure everything's in line for the big meal on Wednesday.'

'You will be here, right?' Duo took his hand, chilly fingers wrapping around his. 'Because I'm going to sulk for, like, ever. Christmas is non-negotiable.'

'I'll be here.' He kissed Duo, with Yuy sitting there watching, and didn't skimp on it-- but he didn't rub it in Yuy's face, either. He pulled Duo to his feet after, and put out a hand for Yuy to help him up. Yuy didn't take it, but he didn't seem put off by the offer of it, at least. That, Zechs decided, would have to count as progress.

'Shall we?' Zechs asked.
When Duo opened the door, Zechs presented him with a kiss and a bottle of chenin blanc. 'Happy Christmas.'

'Christmas Eve,' Duo corrected. He had a smudge of flour on his chin. Zechs wiped it away with his thumb and kissed him again.

'Christmas Eve,' he repeated. 'Am I going to spend it standing in your hallway?'

'Oh, duh.' Duo stepped back for him, holding the door wide. Zechs shed his snow-damp coat onto the rack and pulled Duo back toward him, hip to hip.

'Smells good,' he said. 'Why are you so tense?' He rubbed lightly at Duo's shoulders, squeezing his neck carefully. 'Everything all right?'

'Relena and the French boyfriend are here,' Duo warned him. He huffed a sigh and put his face into Zechs' chest for a moment. Zechs ruffled his hair and let him go when Duo pushed off. 'Heero's been in his room “getting dressed” for about an hour.'

'Which of them do you want me to check on?'

'Heero. No, Relena. I'll do Heero. Here, take the wine, they're out on the balcony there. The boyfriend's name is Troyes and he owns some kind of ungodly villa somewhere where they grow grapes or some shit like that. Make merry.'

Zechs stopped for a corkscrew and opened his bottle, taking a glass from the arrangement on the bar. The balcony blinds were swept back and fairy lights provided a fanciful portal to the balcony, where two forms lit by candlelight were standing. Zechs opened the glass door and let himself out to join them.

'Relena's smile was warm, though her embrace was a little stiff; they had mended much of their relationship with time and effort, but glad as he was to see her, he was no less awkward. They exchanged careful kisses to the cheeks. 'I'm so pleased you've fallen into our little circle in Brussels,' Relena added. 'When Duo told me you'd be here I was so surprised.'

'Finally making friends,' he replied. He extended his hand for the young man lounging against the balcony rail. 'Zechs Merquise.'

'Troyes Lefèvre,' was the answer, with a lazy squeeze to his palm. Well, Zechs could admit the young man was handsome enough for Relena, though his looks were a little too consciously scruffy-- a day's growth of beard to shadow the square-cut jaw, hair just a little shaggy so that it swept the collar and fell rakishly over pretty grey eyes and an aquiline nose. Yes, handsome enough, and despite the diffident attitude, absent the smug superiority Zechs had so often found in children of the Continental aristocracy that had flourished under the Alliance. 'You are Preventer, yes?' Lefèvre asked, leaning back loosely on the rail.

'Yes. Based in Brussels.' Zechs offered his wine, and refreshed both their glasses before pouring for himself. 'May I ask how you know Relena?'

'Relena and I go to same boarding for a time.' Lefèvre gave her a smile, and Relena blushed just slightly, studying her wine with renewed interest. 'She is very passionate in everything. I follow her to her School of Pacifists. I follow her everywhere she allows me.'
'Relena has a way of inspiring loyalty.'

'Stop, both of you.' Relena patted at her hair as a breeze fluttered their candles. 'We'll have to rush back to Sanq tomorrow for Christmas, but I wanted to be here for Duo. There's something about a family dinner that's missing from a state celebration and ribbon-cutting.'

'Very true.' Zechs considered his sister, surprised to realise she'd somehow grown up quite a bit recently. Relena had never lacked for confidence, but there was something more relaxed about her now, less dogged, less single-mindedly earnest. Perhaps a little worldliness. Bundled in a cherry wool coat and scarf, her blonde hair unravelling from a sleek chignon, she could have been any university graduate, any young professional, bright and poised and ready for life's challenges.

Duo's knock on the balcony door made him jump. Duo waved them in.

'I hear Mister Duo is the excellent chef,' Lefèvre said. 'We are all in for the treat.'

'You have no idea,' Zechs murmured, recalling Duo's practise run. He held the door for them both.

Yuy's extended dressing adventure had yielded positive results; he was sprucener than Zechs had ever seen him, wearing sleek grey trousers and a new-looking navy jumper. Even his hair was well-groomed, carefully brushed flat. The scowl was the same, with an edge of helpless anguish as he stared at anything but Relena. Duo looked worried, but smiled for his guests.

'Dinner's served,' he said. 'Relena, you're here. Troyes, between me and Zechs. Heero, you're there at the head.'

They sat, Lefèvre holding Relena's chair as she swept her long skirt under her to settle. Duo returned with the soup pot and ladled them each a serving of carbonnade a la flamande, a Flemish beer-based stew. 'Special occasion, so lots of bacon,' Duo told them. 'Pancetta, actually. I like it better with the beer, keeps a little sweetness.'

'Truly excellent,' Lefèvre complimented. He turned an eye-crinkling lady-killer grin on Duo. 'Relena has told me of your many talents. I see she does not exaggerate.'

'I rock,' Duo answered modestly. 'Heero, try it with a little bread. So you and Relena were in school together, Troyes?'

'Yes, as children. We have many classes together, the-- how you say, the--'

'Classics,' Relena supplied. 'Troyes is a modernist, actually, but of course the moderns spend most of their energy referring back to the classics.'

'Heero's a big reader.' Duo spooned a mouthful. Heero gave a sudden sharp frown at Duo, and from the way he jerked slightly Zechs guessed there had been some under-the-table kicking. 'He likes TS Eliot. Eliot's a modernist, right?'

'But I see you know something of the modernists too. Have you read Stéphane Mallarmé? Paul Valéry?'

'La Jeune Parque,' Heero said.

'One of the greatest French poems of the twentieth century AD.'

Duo finished his soup and overturned his spoon. 'Not much of a poetry guy, personally. But I like art. I got to go to the Louvre once. And I went to the Renoir exhibit while it was here last year.'
'Ah, Renoir! So you regard we French well in some respects at least. Which of his paintings is your favourite?'

'I don't know names or anything. I guess--' Duo shrugged finally. 'The one with the mom and the little kids in the blue frocks and the dog.'

'Which is this?'

'I don't know, I don't know titles. They're on a couch, the mom and her two little girls--'

'Mademoiselle Charpentier and Her Children,' Zechs supplied, catching on. 'Though one of the children is a boy.'

'Why's he in a dress then? That's weird.'

'Ah, no, Mademoiselle Charpentier. Yes, I know it.' Lefèvre tossed his hair with a finger, nodding to himself. 'A sentimental choice. Why you like this one so much?'

'Because it's safe. It's a picture about safe. They're in a pretty room all by themselves and they're smiling and calm and safe. The dog is asleep even. There's nothing in the entire world of that picture that can hurt them or threaten them in any way at all. There isn't anything dark or symbolic or mean or wrong. Just-- safe.'

'A picture of perfection. Renoir had a unique ability to convey such emotion.'

'Unique, all right. It's like a complete idiot painted it. I don't know about France in whenever that was, but did he ever, like, step outside? Who the hell wouldn't want to trade some gooey ignorance for the harsh reality? I mean I like art as much as the next guy, but come on, how useless can you--' Duo was the one who jerked, this time, and his eyes flickered to Yuy. He pursed his lips. 'We all ready for the second course?'

Relena bit her lower lip. 'May I help clear dishes?' she asked smoothly. 'I'll take that for you, Heero, Troyes.'

Zechs half rose, as did the other two men, but Duo and Relena were already gone with the soup bowls. Zechs sank back. Well, Duo had predicted accurately. Awkward indeed. 'More wine?' he asked the others.

They made it through dinner without any incidents. The evening even ended rather pleasantly--Lefèvre had brought a guitar, and after the sorbet they retreated to Duo's couch for a quiet session of music. Zechs had not sung carols since earliest childhood and barely remembered the words, but Relena contributed her smooth contralto and Duo his slightly hoarse tenor. Yuy did not sing, but he shocked Zechs by asking for a turn with the guitar. Duo and Relena wore identical soft smiles as he played, more halting than Lefèvre, plucking out the notes of The First Noel. They emptied three bottles of wine between the five of them, until Relena's eyes began to close more often than they opened, and Duo's laugh was a little readier than usual. It was Lefèvre who called it a halt at nearly midnight.

'We fly in two hours,' he said, patting Relena's slim hand. 'Shall we call for the car?'

'Mm.' Relena looped her loose hair behind her ears, blinking sleepily. 'Yes. Thank you, Troyes. Duo, tonight was lovely. Thank you so much.'

'I'm glad you came.' Duo gave her a tight hug. 'It was good to see you again. Troyes, really good to meet you. I'll walk you down to the car.'
Yuy joined Zechs in a sort of listless shuffling when they were suddenly alone. Together they transferred the bottles to the bin under the sink, rinsed the plates, capped jars and bagged leftovers. Zechs ran himself a glass of cold water to fight off the deep yawns that had taken hold. Midnight on Christmas Eve, and if he couldn't quite believe he'd just spent it with two Gundam Pilots and his sister Relena Peacecraft, well-- he couldn't quite say it wasn't exactly what he wanted, either.

Duo came back shivering in his shirtsleeves but grinning as widely as a Cheshire cat. 'I don't think you have to worry about the French boyfriend,' he told Yuy.

Yuy's head came up from the chocolate cake. 'What? Why?'

'Because he tried to grab my ass out there.' Duo took Zechs' water for a few deep swallows. 'And here I thought he was just showing off with all that crap about art and culture.'

Zechs wasn't sure whether to laugh or be offended. 'You were being set up?'

'Hilarious, right? And apparently I impressed him. It's good to have options.' Duo finished the water and returned the empty glass. 'Do you own any villas? Because I might have to think carefully about this.'

'Har har.'

'He's gay?' Yuy was saying in disbelief. 'Her boyfriend is--'

'Not her boyfriend, clearly.' Duo quirked his head at Yuy. 'Forge on, brother.'

Zechs cleared his throat. 'Did you want to finish cleaning up now?'

'God, no. Let it soak overnight. I'm beat.' Duo cracked his shoulders in a hard stretch, his eyes coming sideways to Zechs. 'You headed out?' he asked, overly casual. 'I'll walk you out, too, but let me get my coat. It's fucking Antarctica out there.'

'Actually, I'd rather sleep here, if you don't mind. I shouldn't really drive now, and the metro will be closed.'

'Oh.' Duo's sideways glances went to Yuy, then. 'Um, yeah. I can make up the couch.'

'The couch?'

'Duo.' Yuy ate the last bite of cake and pushed his plate away. 'You can have sex in your room. I don't care.'

'Heero.' Duo rolled his eyes.

'Duo,' Yuy repeated in the same tone. 'You put up with it for me. I can put up with it for you.'

Unaccountably Duo flushed. 'Uh,' he said.

Zechs decided that was as close as they were going to get to a happy resolution. 'Thank you,' he interjected. 'Sleep well. And happy Christmas.'

'Yeah.' Yuy tugged at Duo's ponytail. 'Dinner was good.'

'Thanks.' Duo smiled at his friend. 'Thanks, Heero.'

'So.' Zechs propped his elbows on the bar. 'Success.'
'Who knew.' Duo leant on one of his stools. 'Glad you were here. Everyone behaved.'

'Except Relena's little date.'

'Oh, don't worry about that. She didn't know. I hadn't talked to her in a long time and it just didn't come up when I was inviting her this year. If it helps, she got my type totally wrong.'

'There didn't seem to be anything particularly wrong with him.'

'He's not you,' Duo said.

Zechs caught Duo by the belt and pulled him close. He smoothed his hand over Duo's pert behind. 'You should have broken his fingers.'

'Not in front of your sister.' Duo reached past him to flick off the light. 'Well, since we have permission now, let's go to bed.'

Duo's bedroom was neat as ever, though Zechs detected a few rejected jumpers that indicated Duo had had his own bout with dressing doubts. He folded them for the bureau and then stripped his own, draping it over the back of the chair and following it with his shoes, stockings, and finally trousers. He shivered as he crossed to the radiator, cranking it up to a humane output of actual heat. A twitch at the curtain revealed a deep blanket of snow in the back garden. He let it fall and sat on the edge of the bed to wait for Duo to finish in the bath.

Duo returned with a faint scent of soap and a damp towel that he flung in Zechs' face. Zechs gave himself a quick swipe, grateful to find it warm, and turned back the duvet for them. 'You ready?'

'Yeah.' Duo climbed on with a pointy calvacade of elbows and knees, and Zechs settled in beside him, tucking a limp down pillow tight to his shoulders. He sought Duo's hand under the duvet, but it stayed limp when he linked their fingers. Duo was staring up at the ceiling, his lips tight as he chewed his cheek.

'Duo.' Zechs propped himself up against the wall and guided Duo down over his legs. He rubbed firmly at Duo's shoulders, not surprised to find him tight-muscled and tense still. Duo hugged quietly at Zechs' knee and let him do it, which itself spoke of greater unhappiness. 'Tell me about it,' Zechs murmured.

'It's stupid.'

'I've never known you to be preoccupied with anything stupid except your phone.'

'So funny.' Duo curled around him, his voice vibrating softly against Zechs' bare thigh. 'That jerk.
French jerk not-boyfriend.'

'What about him?'

'Outside-- Relena gets into the car, right, and Troyes turns to me and says some shit about how she was right, I'm exactly as she described, and he wants me to have his number.' Duo shrugged under Zechs' massage. 'Nevermind. I'm just tired. I need to sleep.'

'You can if you want.' Zechs shifted to work on the knots in Duo's neck. 'Or you can tell me what's really bothering you. If you like. I would like.'

'It's just so dumb--' Duo sat up to turn off the radiator and instead remove a second quilt from the closet. 'I pretty much told him at dinner that I thought his education was a bunch of hooey, and if Relena was at all honest about who I am he's got to know I don't fall in with Pacifism, at the very least. So what the hell kind of common ground does he think we've got? He doesn't, that's the answer. So he grabs my ass and tells me we'd be hot together. I'm the only one at that table who doesn't read French fucking poetry, but we'd be hot in bed? Am I supposed to fuck him because he's rich? I'm supposed to fuck him because that's what guys like me are good for. Ignorant but hot. Terrific. Fucking hilarious.'

'I think you're right to be upset.' Zechs swung his legs to the edge of the bed, but didn't rise; Duo was slamming the closet shut and on his way to the bath again with his empty waterglass. 'I'm surprised at Relena. She couldn't have known.'

'No, of course not. He probably plays up the loyal puppy act with her and she thinks he's a great guy.' He heard Duo run the water. 'I'm just tired. It's not like it's the first time. I just thought...'

'Duo.' Zechs followed him down the hall and stood against the wall, watching him lean over the sink in the dark. 'You deserve to be appreciated for your total person. Not just how attractive the outside is.'

Duo dropped his toothbrush back into its cup. 'Oh, and you do?'

Zechs smiled. 'Why, it just so happens I do. But I already knew my education was a bunch of hooey.'

Duo was startled into a laugh. 'Jesus. Sorry. That was pretty rude. God, and Relena too. You can probably recite French poetry in Russian.'

'Only when inspired.'

'Forgive me?' Duo poked him in the belly until Zechs caught his hand. 'Forgive me. I'm super super sorry.'

'Oh, I'm just sure you are.' He put out his hand. 'Shall we?'

They had never been completely undressed with each other. Zechs found himself unexpectedly appreciative of the experience. Anticipation really had sweetened the reveal. The slender trail of hair from Duo's navel to groin fascinated his finger pads; when he cupped Duo, touching him there for the first time, he caught himself trying to log the experience for memory, the kind of intense concentration he'd once reserved for the first test flight of a new mobile suit. Duo's weight straddled his thighs, Duo's breath sighing against his ear as they explored, no teasing now. Duo's neck was tense under his hand again, for better reasons now. He dragged his palm down the bumps of Duo's spine, pulled him near at the small of the back. They tipped into a slow roll, and he pressed his open mouth, his tongue against Duo's skin, his sternum, his navel. Duo whispered
something at him, but it didn't matter if he couldn't quite hear it. He knew what it was. He left a
kiss on Duo's hip and slid off the bed, reaching for his trousers.

Duo cracked a laugh. 'You drove all the way here with lube in your pocket? What if I'd kicked you
out after all?'

'Then I would have driven home with it.' He paused beside the bed, tapping the tube against his
knuckles. 'You have... before?'

'Have-- done the deed? Yuh.' Duo touched the tip of him, and Zechs closed his eyes. 'Which is how
I know this is going to go a lot smoother if you come back down here.'

They took their time working up to it, Zechs judging his way by the fits and starts of Duo's
breathing, the little shivers, the strength of Duo's grip on his hair. He wrapped both of Duo's long
legs around him, tight around his waist. At one finger Duo was stiff, tentative. At two he began to
relax into it, and Zechs played lightly with him, coaxing him to hardness, fondling Duo in front and
behind until Duo was biting his lips. By mutual agreement they arranged themselves for the final
act, Zechs half-reclined against the pillows, Duo leaning back on his hands, his knees wide, his
groin hot in Zechs' hands. Despite Duo's assurances, Zechs had the private notion that he wouldn't
go deep-- but that idea didn't last long. His vision went hazy as Duo's body opened for him, and
inch in and out and in until some point arrived when he realised he was fully seated, that Duo's
head hung back from his shoulders, that there was oily fluid gumming his fingers around the shaft
of Duo's cock. He pulled Duo up by a limp arm, chest to chest, and locked their lips together.

'Duo
obligingly rolled his hips when Zechs guided him, looser now, more abandoned to it. With Duo
mouthing at his jaw and neck Zechs rocked him back and forth, building a slow tingling burn in
his-- almost-- almost, when Duo took back the reins, sitting upright on his own, bearing down,
reaching behind to cup Zechs' sac. Zechs panted through his orgasm with Duo grinning down at
him.

'That was so worth the wait,' Duo said.

'No argument.' His voice felt rusty. Zechs cleared his throat. 'You better let that go.'

'Oh, this?' Duo tugged at his sac again, and Zechs ground his jaw on a groan. 'Or this?' he asked,
pulling none too gently at Zechs' nipple.

'Just because you're ready to go again--'

'It's my turn.' Duo had him by both nipples now, and his squirming in Zechs' lap was no accident. 'I
flaked out on the first one. I can do better.'

'You were better than better already. I don't doubt there's a steady upward trajectory.' He hooked
Duo in a headlock and buried him against the sheets, using his weight to splay Duo down. 'Be
good and I'll see what I might do about that.'

'Look at you, all take-charge, man about town. I like it.'

He shut Duo up the only way he'd ever found that worked. 'You were definitely worth the wait,' he
whispered.

'I like you too.' Duo combed through Zechs' hair slowly, eyes sleepily low. 'I like you a lot. A lot a
lot. We still on the same page?'

He hid his smile in Duo's shoulder. 'You can be sure of that.'
'Happy Christmas, Zechs.'
'Breakfast is on.' Duo bounced the mattress with a knee as he reached over Zechs to place water and a pill bottle on the bedside table. 'Aspirin. If you're suffering half as much as I am, it's got to be Christmas.'

There was a throbbing sort of swell in his head that said he'd overindulged the night before. Happily, his stomach stayed in place as he sat up. 'Time is it?' he managed fuzzily. 'Where are my underpants?'

'About a foot from your toes. Don't bend over just yet, though.' Duo fetched them for him. 'It's half seven. We slept in.'

Zechs pushed his hair out of his face and got his fingers about halfway through it before he found an impassable tangle. 'Can't we just go back to sleep?'

'I never realised you were a layabout.' Duo did at least sit on the edge of the bed. 'You want to? I can leave the light off and let you rest in.'

'You're getting up though?' Zechs took the aspirin when Duo put it in his hand, swallowing it down with a grimace. 'Coffee?'

'I'm on it, hot stuff.' Duo lifted Zechs' hair off his neck and kissed him gently there. 'Happy first morning after. I put your clothes in the dryer so they'll be warm when you get out of the shower.'

Zechs managed a tired smile. 'Who could pass that up.'

His clothes were, as promised, pleasantly toasted and wrinkle-free when he emerged from the bath ten minutes later. There was no sign of Duo, but the bed was already made and toiletries laid out for him. Zechs brushed his wet hair and ran the electric razor over his chin and cheeks, and cleaned his teeth with a new travel brush that had found its way to the sink. He gathered up his wallet and shoes and opened the door on the main apartment.

Yuy was seated at the bar eating something that smelled unappetisingly like oatmeal. He glanced once at Zechs and then ignored him. Zechs returned the favour, choosing to finish dressing and attend the freshly brewed coffee. He found cream in the refrigerator and added a generous, calorie-heavy half-cup that settled the wobble in his stomach. There was eggy toast waiting in a pan for him, caster sugar and syrup waiting beside a plate. He fixed himself a double portion and stood at the stove to eat it.

Duo finally reappeared, entering via the front door and locking it behind him. 'That Preventer is still out there,' he explained to Zechs. 'I brought breakfast down.'

'You're not supposed to draw attention to him,' Zechs said automatically. 'Though-- I'm sure he appreciated it.'

'She. Kagiso Ninow, also known as Cobra, which is yet another sterling example of crappy Preventer code-names. She's from Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa and she had to spend last night in her car instead of at home with her boyfriend, a statistical engineer.' Duo plunked an empty plate in the sink. 'And she liked the pheasant last night, too.'

'You are really not supposed to spy on your spies.' Zechs rubbed a dusting of snow off Duo's
shoulder. 'You're making us look bad. Is there anything you can't do faster and better? Or more deliciously? Breakfast is excellent.'

'Aw, I love it when you lay it on thick.' Duo shoved Yuy's foot off the second stool and sat. 'You don't have to run off, do you? I was thinking of, you know, like, plans. Day plans. Even I don't have to work today, so how to spend the free time, right?'

'I'm all yours until Monday morning. What plans did you have in mind, though? The only thing that's open is the Christmas Market, and that not until noon.' He cottoned onto the gleam in Duo's eye then. 'I'm really not up to a bike ride in a blizzard.'

'Wimp. It's barely futzy out there. Besides, nothing cures a hangover like fresh air and a good work-out.'

Yuy shuddered and hugged his oatmeal closer. 'Just because you can doesn't mean you have to,' he muttered.

'We're on Earth! We should be out there enjoying it, taking advantage of it. Winter's a completely natural process.'

'People do freeze to death in cold, Duo,' Zechs pointed out. 'I would rather not be one of them.'

'If we stay in I'm going to make you clean.'

Yuy stood. 'I'll get my shoes.'

**

They didn't bicycle after all, given that Zechs had used Yuy's bike the last few times and there wasn't a spare to accommodate his presence. They walked the bike path instead. Most of the city-bound path had been cleared of snow, but not enough to take them through the countryside, a fact for which Zechs was profoundly grateful. At least the brisk pace Duo set was intensive enough to keep him warm. Zechs envied Cobra her heated car, following them at distance.

'I thought Relena looked good,' Duo said. 'They aren't feeding her in Sanq, clearly. Did you see the way she cleared her plate? Poor girl is starving up there. What kind of food do you have in Sanq, Zechs?'

'I don't really remember much,' Zechs admitted. 'I was young. I remember not liking surkaal. Sour cabbage.'

Duo screwed his face up comically. 'Gee, wonder why.'

'You might be interested in hárkal. Putrefied shark.'

'You are fucking kidding me.'

Zechs grinned at him. 'Not even a little. Or hrútspungur, although that's more traditional for Icelanders.'

'Do I even want to know?'
'Ram's scrotum with testicles,' Yuy said.

Duo turned a little green. 'Okay,' he said bravely. 'We can totally talk about something else now. Seriously, you ate that shit?'

'My father was required to observe all sorts of traditions. We often ate with diplomats. Smalahove terrified me, honestly-- smoked sheep's head.'

'Jesus.'

Zechs relented. 'Most of it was fairly normal. Cured salmon, crab, game like reindeer. A lot of mutton.'

Duo faced the path again with deeply hunched shoulders. 'Man. No wonder you like what I cook.'

'Did you hear that?'

Yuy had stopped dead. Zechs came to a halt, attentive as soon as he saw the tense set of Yuy's face. Duo only kept walking, though. 'It's probably Kagiso,' he shrugged. 'She's supposed to be close enough to us to help if something goes cuckoo.'

'Cobra,' Zechs corrected absently. 'You don't know who's listening in, Duo.'

'If she's doing her job, then no-one is, isn't that the point?'

'Yuy? Did you hear anything else?'

Yuy's scowl, so far absent that morning, appeared like magic, turning down his brows and fixing his mouth in a thin slash of upset. 'No,' he said reluctantly. 'It might have been the wind.'

'Stop being paranoid,' Duo called back.

'If you did hear something, we could turn back,' Zechs offered, though he lowered his voice enough that Duo, now ahead by several paces, wouldn't hear.

'No. Not yet.' Yuy squared his shoulders. 'Be alert.'

'I am.'

Yuy kicked at a puddle icing over. His eyes followed Duo as he went around the curve, not waiting for them. He looked up at Zechs. He said, 'You're really going through with this.'

Zechs slipped his hands into the pockets of his coat. He could see Duo through the trees, and more importantly he could see Cobra's car on the street nearby, so he didn't push Yuy to keep moving. 'Through with what.'

'Duo.'

'Our relationship? Yes.'

'Why?' Yuy asked bluntly.

'Because I like him very much.' Zechs felt his own mouth trying to frown, and stopped himself. 'I don't think you get a veto.'

'But you only like him. Not love him.'
'That's a question better reserved for Duo and myself.' Zechs took up the path again, and felt Yuy behind him. 'Why the interrogation? You really feel you're “protecting” him from me? Or that he's too stupid to protect himself?'

'I'm asking if you have an agenda.'

Zechs stopped moving so abruptly that Yuy swayed back from him to keep their distance. He locked eyes with Yuy. 'No,' he said flatly. 'I have never been less than honest with either of you. Ever, even when we were enemies.'

'Even when?' Yuy repeated.

Zechs stepped close to him. Yuy was all bunched muscle under his coat, staring unblinking up at him. 'The war is more than over,' Zechs told him softly. 'I'd encourage you to let it go, unless you want to resume our previous engagement where we left off at Libra.'

'Stop it.' Duo's voice lashed out in the sudden silence, and they both started like guilty schoolboys, jumping back from each other. Duo stood on the path ahead of them, his fists clenched at his side. 'If you two are going to fight each other you can do it on your own fucking time. Why are you trying to ruin everything?'

Zechs rubbed his chin, only then aware at how much he'd heated over in confronting Yuy. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I wasn't thinking.'

'Obviously,' Duo snapped. 'Heero, you know better. You know me better.'

Another time, Zechs would have been interested at the way Yuy dropped his eyes almost submissively to that. It suggested he might have been wrong in his assessment that Yuy was the one in charge. At the moment, he had to stop himself from doing the same.

'Go home,' Duo said then. 'Neither of you wanted to be out here anyway. Cobra can follow me.'

Zechs cleared his throat. 'You really shouldn't be out here alone.'

'I'm not, am I? I have my damn escort. Leave. I'm pissed off at you both and I want to walk it off.' Duo turned, but go no further than a pivot before he came back. 'It's fucking Christmas,' he said. 'It would have been nice to enjoy that fact.'

The chastened quiet between Zechs and Yuy lasted all the way back to the apartment and more. Yuy went into his room and shut the door immediately. With nothing else to do, Zechs occupied himself cleaning the kitchen, washing the last of their dishes and scrubbing down the counters. Duo had been right to call out their bad behaviour. He hadn't even realised their animosity ran so deep still-- triggered by something so small. Lingering suspicions. So what if Yuy didn't accept him? Yuy was hardly the only one who had wondered aloud if Zechs really deserved to bury his past with relative ease, more easily, perhaps, than Yuy and Duo had been allowed, given their imprisonment and subsequent difficulty in Brussels. But to accuse him of stringing Duo along as some nefarious plot for revenge was over the line, and he thought he'd been right to swing back on that one. Yuy was clearly ready and willing to be a problem between he and Duo, and that was going to have to be dealt with. If he and Duo were going to be-- permanent.

If he loved Duo.

That, he realised slowly, was not a question to which he had an answer.

Except to say that it was probably too soon to tell. Legitimate to say that; after all, they'd only been
dating for a few months. And Duo himself had put decided emphasis on the process of dating, of observing those little milestones very carefully. They had even agreed to forgo an exchange of Christmas gifts. He'd never even played Duo's thumbdrive of music. It sat in his desk at work, still in its wrapping. Somehow it had been easier to stash it away, let it wait until he did know what he felt.

He supposed that meant he had an answer after all. He did like Duo, very much. And was willing to see where dating might take them. But that was all, for right now.

And he didn't think Duo could say anything different. Duo was the one who'd set the pace for them, after all. Up to and including the development of their sexual relationship. Which had been very nice, very welcome, very enjoyable-- but not, perhaps, very intimate, very romantic. If anything, there'd been more intimacy in the things that had come before that, the making out stage.

Wasn't that food for thought.

He was seated on the couch reading a travel book about Italy when Duo finally returned. Either Duo's temper had been strong or he'd taken advantage of his time alone to properly exercise; Duo had been out two hours alone. When he heard the key in the door, he went to the kitchen, to turn on the full kettle so Duo could have a hot drink. He leant on the fridge to wait.

Duo ducked quietly through the door, pausing just a second when he saw Zechs. He closed the door behind him and shucked his coat onto the rack, his wet shoes onto the mat. 'Hey,' he said.

'Hello.' Zechs nodded to the kettle. 'Tea or chocolate?'

'Um, chocolate would be good.' Duo approached the bar warily, sliding onto a stool. His hair was wet. Zechs pulled a fresh towel from the drawer and went behind him, gently wrapping Duo's head in it and blotting away the moisture. Duo let him, and even relaxed enough to let his back rest against Zechs' chest.

'You'll catch cold,' Zechs said. 'Why don't you take a bath.'

'If you're being this nice, I gather you're not breaking up with me.'

'Not today.' He gave Duo's ponytail one last squeeze with the towel. 'Go on. I'll bring in the chocolate.'

'What, no ram's testicles?'

He flicked Duo's chilly ear. 'Cute. Go get warm.'

Yuy emerged just as the pipes began to creak. Zechs gave him a mild look as he spooned chocolate shavings into a mug. 'He's taking a bath,' he said.

Yuy glanced at the bathroom. He frowned. 'He likes whiskey in his hot chocolate.'

Zechs found the bottle atop the fridge. 'How much?'

'Just a splash.' Yuy came as far as the bar. 'I will-- make an effort.'

Zechs flattened his hands to the countertop. 'As will I.'

'All right.' Yuy nodded once, uncomfortably. And that was it. With nothing else to add, he went back to his room, though this time he left the door open. Zechs exhaled deeply. He flexed his hands
once, then resumed making the chocolate, adding water and cream, and splashing whiskey as instructed. He gave it a swirl and took it into the bath.

Duo was sitting naked in six inches of water, eyes closed as he reclined against the tiled wall of the tub. He looked up at Zechs as Zechs entered, and accepted his mug with a murmur of thanks. Zechs eased down to the floor beside the tub, pulling a bath mat under his bottom for cushion and propping himself up against the sink cabinets. He didn't have quite enough room for his legs, so he crossed them loosely.

'Smells good,' Duo commented. He sipped, and his eyebrows went up. 'You found the whiskey.'

'A little bird told me you liked it that way.' Zechs shifted to avoid the dig of a cabinet handle. 'Why don't we start our chat with why you think I'm going to break up with you every time we quibble.'

'Dude, that wasn't a quibble.' Duo's eyes were low, focussed on the steam rising off his chocolate. 'I told you I had a temper.'

'No, it wasn't a quibble. But it wasn't unfair of you, either. I thought I was past that-- competitive stage.'

'Please, you and Heero have been sniffing around each other from the first. Look, I get it. And I know that Heero moving back in here made it worse.' Duo sipped again, and put his mug down. 'It's not my job to stand in the middle of you all and stop you from whatever it is you want to do. It's just that he's my best friend and you're my boyfriend and I don't like it when my boys fight.'

'I can sympathise with that stance.' He chuckled Duo under the chin. 'We've both promised to be good. For your sake, and I think also for ours. It doesn't do either of us any good to regress every time we see each other.'

'That's enlightened of you.'

'I have my moments.' He tugged at Duo's loose hair until Duo leaned in. Zechs stroked Duo slowly. 'You had wanted to wait. I just wonder if you felt we waited long enough.'

'I think so. I mean, yeah. Don't you?'

'I want to know what you feel.'

'Feel pretty good.' Duo's fingers wrapped around his. 'Feel pretty good about us. And I loved that face you made when you were coming.' He squeezed his eyes shut and stuck his tongue out. Zechs gave him a quick yank, and Duo laughed. 'What's with the questions?'

'I just-- I-- want to be sure that--'

Duo kissed him suddenly. 'That I'm happy?' He caressed Zechs' face. 'I'm happy.'
Zechs had a surprise waiting for him Monday morning at the office. Tropic was back, seated in their cubicle and working on the computer as if he'd never been gone.

'Welcome back,' Zechs told him. He set his briefcase on his desk. 'I was starting to forget what you looked like.'

Tropic's expression indicated he'd missed the humour in that. Zechs didn't repeat it. He shed his coat, stomped his feet a few extra times to rid the last of the snow from his boots, and settled in. 'Did you get back in time for Christmas?' he asked.

'Last night.' Tropic frowned at his email as he clicked through it. 'Red-eye flight.'

'Did you take care of the emergency?'

'Emergency?'

'The reason you had to rush out last week.'

'Mm.' Tropic opened one of the notices about budgetary publications, and closed it just as quickly. 'My son,' he said.

Zechs pressed his lips together. 'I didn't know you had one. How old?'

'Too old for these ridiculous failures.' Tropic abandoned his email and settled back with their load of paper case files. 'You know how family can be. Continually disappointing.'

If there was some courteous reply to that, Zechs was at a loss. 'Sorry it ruined the holiday,' he said finally. 'A flight out and back? He doesn't live nearby?'

'His mother and I were estranged. I didn't raise him. If I had, his little inadequacies wouldn't plague me.' Tropic shrugged it off. 'He's not much of a son. I don't suppose I'm much of a father. But he still rings whenever he falls into another one of his self-created problems.'

Zechs made a point of absorbing himself in his own email, after that. Tropic's poor mood communicated itself, though, especially when Zechs saw the official approval for their trip east. Travelling with a grumpy companion would not be all that enjoyable. 'We should gear up,' he said. 'I had the Quartermaster disperse our original pack. I'll order it again.'

'Right.' Tropic slapped the case down on the desk. 'I'll check on the hotel, remind them we're coming--'

The central alarm blared suddenly, making them both jump. Zechs pulled up their intranet alerts, even as Sally's vocal announcement called for them to do so.

Neptune appeared at their cubicle. 'Trouble on L4,' she said curtly. 'There's been an incident on one of the mining asteroids. We're all up for this one. Better hurry-- we rate the jet for once.'

Zechs reached under his desk for his ready bag. 'We're behind you. Neptune-- any casualties?'

'Fourteen,' she answered grimly. 'We'll be meeting the local branch of Preventers there.'

Zechs bent for the phone even as he shouldered his bag. He dialled quickly as Tropic gathered up
their case papers out of the drawer and sent files to print. 'Duo,' he said, as soon as he heard pickup on the line. 'Watch the news today.'

'What?' Duo's startled voice was almost drowned out by loud clanging. 'What's happening?'

'Something involving a friend of yours. You'll want to watch the news. I have to go.'

'Wait, Zechs--'

'I'll contact you when I can.' He hung up, and turned-- and ran right into Tropic.

'You contacted Duo Maxwell?' Tropic said.

'He's a friend of Quatre Winner,' Zechs replied shortly. 'If Winner is amongst the injured, Duo will want to know.'

'You're not authorised to contact anyone outside Preventers with classified information!'

'It's not going to be classified when it hits the news, if it hasn't already.'

Neptune looked troubled. 'That's a pretty grey area, Wind.'

'Preventers are not at odds with compassion.' Zechs gestured them both out of his way. 'And if we are, then we need to seriously question what our purpose is.'

Neptune chewed her lower lip. Then she shrugged and moved aside for him. 'Your neck on the line. I won't argue with your interpretation.'

Tropic was not so easily solved. He was at Zechs' back, glaring; Zechs could feel him there, and determinedly ignored him.

'Let's go,' he said.
‘Head down!’ someone yelled, and Zechs ducked without ever ascertaining if it were directed at him. The chaos on the docks was a roiling, furious mass of humanity. When he stepped up into the Preventers forensics truck, the cave-like echo of the docks abated only slightly. He pulled Neptune up behind him, and she shut them in with a slam.

‘How can anyone hear themselves think in all that?’ Tropic said crossly. He fell sideways into a chair, eyes already seeking out the monitors. ‘What the hell good do they think they're doing, swamping the mines? Who let them?’

‘Dock master’s in with the extraction teams,’ Mèo, one of the locals, told them tensely, wary of insult. Neptune's calming smile seemed to mollify him a little. ‘It's their men in there. We got out the families, at least. We've sent them back colony-side.’

‘How many have they pulled out so far?’ Zechs asked. He crossed his arms on the back of Tropic's chair, trying to make sense out of what he was seeing on the screens. It was one of the larger asteroids that had been hit-- and hit barely captured the enormity of it. ‘We have to be thinking bomb at this point.’

‘No question.’ Sally got the other chair by virtue of rank. She outlined the big raw crater that decorated the side of the asteroid. ‘How big is that blast radius?’

‘Judging from the damage it did on the outside, there might have been more than the two we registered, maybe even several. What you're looking at there, the big hole, that's what happened after the blast-- that whole area collapsed in.’ Mèo reached over Sally's shoulder and pointed to another monitor bearing a map of the mine. ‘Best we can figure, there's three tunnels that are gone. Of the other nineteen, they've only been able to clear four.’

‘Four?’ Sally met Zechs' eyes, and repeated his question for him. ‘Casualty count?’

‘Twenty as of two hours ago,’ was the grim answer.

Zechs quietly left the van. Now that he had some orientation, the chaos took on some recognisable shape; there was a crew working on rubble removal, and there was a make-shift medical tent to deal with injuries, and there was the extraction team support, organising some heavy equipment at the edge of the dock for transport to the mine. And there, hovering at the edge, were reporters, talking animatedly to their cameras and panning over the scene over and over again.

‘Agent Wind.’ It was the foreman he'd met before, when they'd come to investigate the original instance of sabotage. Zechs shook his hand briefly. ‘I can run you through what's happened whenever you're ready, sir.’

‘Please.’ Zechs held the van door for him, and gave the tired man a boost up. It was getting crowded inside, but Tropic gave up his chair for the foreman, and the rest of them settled to the edges to look at the monitors.

‘We opened morning shift with the required safety examinations,’ the foreman opened hoarsely. ‘Not once in my life have I skipped on that. I had one problem area but it was good as of 0700-- we were shoring up a weak shaft. But it was solid. I checked it myself, and Mine Safety inspected it just the day before, and they passed on it too.’ He wiped at the grime on his hands, clenching them on his knees. ‘I had four crews in the mine when we felt the first blast at 10:28. We got Third out.
First checked in at 10:04 at this junction here, Second checked in at 09:56 at this junction, and Fourth were here as of 10:15.'

'Then Fourth are...' Sally sighed. 'How many were in that crew?'

'Seven. All of them presumed dead. Seven more in Second. Six of our rescuers too--' He fell silent for just one painful moment. 'They went in the second blast.'

A momentary hush fell over the van. Zechs broke it. 'All right,' he said. 'So we've got one crew and how many rescuers still missing?'

'Eight crewmen,' the foreman said, and reached over the Preventer to shift one of the screens to the centre monitor. Time clocks, all counting down in flickers of digital seconds. 'Nine rescuers who were behind the blast and past the secondary junction when it hit. And--''

'Quatre Winner.' Zechs stared glumly at the initials next to that countdown. 'What was he doing there?'

'He's been here almost every day since the first-- first-- incident.' The foreman scrubbed his sallow cheeks. 'After you Preventers were here it seemed safe. He said it was important for people to see him, get to know him-- he's young, you know, he cares about that-- his father sure'n hell never--'

'But he wasn't one of the dead you recovered,' Sally prompted. Her expression had gone smooth and professional, as had Zechs. The foreman may not have meant it as a slap, but it was-- Zechs had closed their inspection here with no results. So what had he missed? And how much blood would he have to count on his hands when they found out?

'No.' The foreman pointed to the clocks. 'Our wi-fi hotspots got knocked out in the blasts, but we have the last broadcast data from their check-ins. We're monitoring their air supply based on the estimate that each of them had their emergency kits-- an extra hour of air. If they made it to the safety curtain at the closest junction, then there's a spare tank for each crewman.'

'What about Winner?' Neptune asked.

'Five extra tanks over and above, despite the space it takes up. He insisted. So he'll be covered, and that's four extra tanks, but... but they can't share the tanks. So whoever gets the last tanks is going to live the longest, if we don't get to them fast enough.'

Zechs was calculating in his head, but even so, Neptune beat him. 'Then your countdowns are only going to be accurate if they made to the safety curtains and if they're one of the ones who get to use a second tank. Take those conditions away and we've got--'

'Based on the last data we had on each man, and counting the emergency kit they're each carrying--' The local Preventer tapped quickly on the keyboard, and the countdowns dropped a stomach-wrenching twelve hours each. The remaining total was beyond bleak.

'Two hours,' Neptune said faintly. 'Less than two hours.'

'We're making progress on clearing the fall. But we've got seismic activity still in the unstable sectors and Preventers haven't completed scans yet for more explosives. And we're dealing with a lot of dust, sirs and ladies. Those explosions pulverised a lot of silicate. We've got big magnets on the nickel-iron, but we can't run the vacuums at the same time as all the rescue activity.'

'All right.' Sally stood. 'We know the situation. The rescuers will do their part, and it's time for us to begin ours. The locals--' she nodded respectfully to their fellow Preventer at the monitors-- 'have
compiled the lists of who was on site and who wasn't supposed to be. I want to start interviews and section off possible suspects. Tropic, Wind, you've been here before, so I want you in preliminary screening. Cobra, Mamba, Spider, you're interrogation. Orange and Neptune, liaise with the locals and with HQ and funnel information where it needs to be. Let's go, people.'

**

They missed the two hour mark.

Zechs watched it go on his wristwatch. He tried not to think too much about it when he took a deep breath, knowing there were eighteen miners who might be out of air now.

'You can go,' he told the woman sitting across from him. She gathered her helmet as she stood, ducking back out of their tent with a small cloud of dust to greet her. Without the vacuums running, dust was starting to clog the docks. Beside him, Tropic coughed into his elbow, and drank deeply from a bottle of water. 'How many are left?' Zechs asked his partner.

Tropic tilted his ePad toward the light. 'Another couple dozen. All of them licensed dock workers who checked in on schedule.'

'We're wasting too much time on this.' Zechs went to the tent flap to look out. The reek of desperation in the crowd outside was getting stronger-- they all knew they'd missed the countdown. 'We're looking for hay in a haystack. We're not going to find anything that way.'

'So what do you suggest?' Tropic joined him, cracking his knuckles in a way that set Zechs' teeth on edge. 'Hay in a haystack,' he repeated himself. 'That's right. We're looking for what we expect to be there. Not what we don't expect to be there. Confirming that the people who clocked in are actually here.'

'And so far we have. There's no-one missing except the miners and Quatre Winner.'

'And why is that?' Zechs abandoned the flap and returned to their worktable. He glared at the downloaded reams of employee lists. 'Why today? What's special about today?'

'Special? Nothing. There's nothing out of the ordinary. That mine's been open for years and there were no--' Tropic came to his side. 'Unless you mean Winner. But the foreman said he's been here every day.'

'Not every day,' Zechs corrected. 'The foreman said almost. Almost every day. What if this attack is aimed at him? Timed for his presence here?'

'That's a leap from sabotage!'

'Is it? Not if sabotage was originally meant to bring him personally down. Tropic, it all fits-- the escalation of events, the threats, Maxwell's drugging--'

'You're not still thinking it's related?' Tropic's scepticism hit Zechs' momentum like a wheel spike. 'This is a whole other game from those things. No-one died in those other instances.'
True. He doubted it, then. Then firmed his resolve. 'Winner must be the target. What other motivation is there?'

'Or Winner the business. Winner Enterprises.' Tropic grabbed for his pad. 'What if it's aimed at the business, or at mining or--'

'Something for which Quatre Winner is the symbol.'

'So what we should be screening for is someone with a personal grudge.' Tropic dropped the pad back to the table and followed it with both fists. 'And that list could be a kilometre long.'

'Longer.'

That was a new voice. Zechs turned, an admonition on his lips, but it wasn't a fellow Preventer or a civilian interrupting them. Trowa Barton.

Still wearing a dust-grimed environmental suit, though he carried the helmet under his arm. Sweat soaked his short hair, streaked his thin face.

'Sit down,' Zechs invited him, gesturing to a chair. 'You should hydrate while you rest.'

'Wind,' Tropic murmured. Zechs hushed him.

Barton took the water, but not the chair. His eyes roamed restlessly back to the tent flap as he downed swallow after swallow. Zechs tapped the pad against his palm, trying not to rush him. The young man was obviously exhausted; every inch of his rigid posture proclaimed a desperate lack of hope.

When the level in the water bottle neared the bottom, Zechs slid the pad across the table. 'Whoever did this had a stronger motivation than revenge on an employer. Endangering this many people is the act of someone with an agenda.'

'Political,' Barton rasped. He picked up the pad, but Zechs could see the lack of focus in his eyes, the way they skipped about. 'He's got enemies. People-- he's not popular on L4. The war.'

'Help us compile a list,' Zechs said. 'We need this. You're closest to him, and you'll be able to inform us better than anyone else.'

The pad dipped to the table. Barton's face was rigid, his muscles jumping as he clenched his jaw. 'I have to go back in there. He--'

'There are dozens of trained rescuers at work,' Tropic interrupted him coolly. 'You can help him better by helping us here.'

Zechs set his hand on Barton's shoulder. 'Sit down,' he said gently. 'I'll get you another water. We won't take a minute longer than we have to, and you can get back to the mine as quickly as possible.'

Barton stared at him, seeing and not seeing him. Zechs offered no further encouragement, knowing he would be obeyed. But he did offer what Barton really needed-- the support of a firm hand on his shoulder, the reassurance that he was doing all he could. When Barton finally nodded, it was little more than a quiver of long eyelashes, but he sat.

'Maybe some coffee and a sandwich,' Zechs said. 'While we have you here. You'll need the strength when you go back out. I'll get it for you.'
Tropic was watching him thoughtfully. Zechs nodded to him. 'Get him started,' he added privately. 'I'll let the Director know and find that food.'

'Mm,' Tropic replied, and watched him leave, too.

**

Barton's list of potential saboteurs was either paranoid or depressing. Either way, 'extensive' didn't quite describe it.

Sally read only the first two pages before she sighed. 'Running this down could take us all the new year,'

'I had him mark the ones he personally considered an immediate danger. It doesn't shorten the list all that much, but it gives us a sense of priority.' Zechs cracked his neck, and then his back, twisting to and fro to alleviate the pressure of aching muscles. He had a headache that wasn't going away, and tried to keep the grump out of his voice.

'Ma'am.' Neptune appeared at the truck's open door, trailing one of the local Preventers. 'They'd made it past the first blocked junction. They didn't find any of the miners-- the safety curtain there was compromised in the explosion. The foreman thinks they would have tried to make it to the next curtain a half-kilometre in.'

Zechs glanced quickly at the monitors. They were two hours past that original countdown. 'If they made it to the next curtain, they'd have those extra air tanks.'

'That's what we're hoping.'

'Neptune.' Sally gestured her in, and Zechs reached to give her a hand up. Neptune's grip was strong as she pushed up over the lip of the truck, and she turned to help Agent Mèo after her. Sally showed her Barton's list. 'Go over this with the locals and see if they can identify anyone who's been on their radar before. Let's get this narrowed down so we can start interviews.'

'Director.' Mèo peered over Neptune's shoulder to get a view of the list. 'I've been posted here for three years. Right here on this front page I can tell you one likely suspect.' At Sally's nod, he took the paper and laid it out by the computers, calling up a new window with net search of Preventers' databanks. 'We've got an open investigation of their activities. They're an intra-colonial group who front a lot of environmental protests. They don't like mining, and they don't like Winner Enterprises.'

'They're violent?' Zechs asked quickly, stooping to look as the databank raised a series of ID photos.

'They talk bigger than they act, but they've been escalating the past few years. They claimed credit for a bomb at a fuel depot-- no injuries then. We intercepted digital traffic between the kid who says he's the leader and some of the known associates--' He tapped in a passcode, and opened a file of emails. 'He's a college kid, your hot-house radical leftist. Personally, I always thought he was just a self-important jerk. But he attracts some real nutjobs. These emails went out a three months ago.'

'We will not compromise with traditional conservationist incrementalism,' Neptune read aloud for
them. 'We are fed up with capitalist pigs who throw up road-block after road-block to true preservation of the natural universe.' Neptune shrugged. 'Yadda yadda. Hot-house is right. That's pretty generic.'

'But look at the second paragraph here. This is where he starts walking the edge. He's using code words for violent action. If we really want to stop the capitalist pigs, we have to hit them where they'll feel it most-- take out their business interests. And here-- Sometimes the only way to save the hen-house is to burn the fox out of the hole.'

'Any direct mention of the mines?' Sally asked.

'Not from him and not from any of the dozen or so we regularly watch. But there's about fifteen hundred subscribed to FreeSpace's web feed.'

'Get on the line with a judge who will give us a warrant for the subscription list, and then we'll match names from Barton's list and see if we get any hits. And let's keep on the political angle too- - if this is a Gundam Pilot thing, that's a boatload of motivation, too.'

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'Rescue attempts continue here at L4's asteroid mining docks,' the reporter narrated. 'According to an inside source who asks to remain anonymous due to the ongoing nature of the investigation, the miners may have been without air for nine hours. Emergency tanks with eight hours of air were waiting behind safety curtains, but even if the miners were able to reach the tanks, this last precious resource would have been exhausted fifty minutes ago.'

'Who leaked that?' Zechs muttered, but couldn't find the energy to rise. Instead he turned off the sound and closed his eyes on the monitor. His headache had become a full-blown migraine, aggravated by the bone-deep thrum of the vacuums they had finally turned on. It was easier to breathe on the docks now, but the racket threatened to drown out all coherent thought.

'Wind.' It was Neptune; and the cup she carried was steaming hot coffee. Zechs took it with a grateful grunt, burying his nose in it immediately. Warmth spread down his chest, and he heaved a deep breath.

She eased down in the chair next to his, her long legs covered in mud and her usually groomed nails now chipped. 'This is going to have a bad ending, isn't it,' she said softly.

Zechs couldn't answer that. He sipped his coffee again, but it didn't help as much this time. 'You should get some rest,' he said at last. 'Grab a few hours.'

'I'm all right.' She let her dark hair down from its functional bun, combing her fingers through its weight. 'Barton's still out there. I've never seen anyone drive themselves like that. I don't think he really believes Winner's alive, but he won't stop.'

'There's still the extra five tanks.'

'You think he'd take one away from a miner? A man he'd feel responsible for?'

No. No, he didn't. It was insightful of Neptune to say that.
After a moment of quiet, she spoke again. 'I saw you step outside to call him.'

Zechs touched the phone in his coat pocket. 'Call who?'

'Your boyfriend.'

'I didn't pass confidential information.'

'No, I know you wouldn't.' She twisted her hair back and closed her eyes. 'I can understand wanting to talk to someone who can offer comfort.'

It registered, then. She knew about Duo. 'Office gossip,' he guessed stiffly. 'I suppose everyone knows.'

'Cobra was watching their apartment Christmas Eve. You spent the night there. And I could tell that time I met him that Maxwell liked you. He didn't look away from you once.'

His face heated. 'I've been very careful. There's no conflict of interest.'

'If you were a dog, your ruff would be up. It's okay. There's no gossip, not like that. It was just sort of a surprise.'

Zechs rubbed his eyes, and sighed. 'He didn't answer, at any rate. He's probably at work.'

'He seems nice. A nice young guy.' She quirked an eyebrow at him. 'Actually, I'm a little relieved. All this time I thought I'd just lost my mojo.'

His laugh had a little more bark than amusement, but, in the end, he took it as the apology it was. 'I suppose I should have just said something.'

'It wasn't all wasted energy. You're a nice young man yourself.' She smiled at him. 'So. Friends and colleagues?'

'Friends and colleagues.' He pressed her hand.

'Agents.' It was Mèo. 'You'll both want to hear this.'

'Progress?' Neptune beat him to his feet, but they were right on each other exiting the truck.

Mèo was hurrying them toward their interview tent. 'Of a kind. The Winners have come forward.'

'Wait, you said the Winners?' Zechs demanded. 'His own family are claiming responsibility?'

'Sort of.' Mèo held the flap for them. 'Go on, Agents.'

Zechs just had time to twitch his uniform straight. People were coming to their feet at his entrance, and it was quite the crowd inside-- dominated by familiar blond heads. The Winner family resemblance was almost uncanny.

'Agents Wind and Neptune,' Sally introduced them briefly, and ignored them thereafter. 'You were saying, Ms Winner.'

The only blonde who was seated at the table seemed to be the one addressed. 'My sister is-- disturbed,' she said haltingly. She crushed the cuffs of her ombre coat in white-knuckled fist. 'Honestly, I never imagined she was capable of this. I thought it was youth, and anger, that it would-- she would grow up. Out of it.'
'Her sister?' Zechs murmured to Tropic.

'Mavise Winner,' Tropic answered under his breath. 'The family think she's the one who set the bombs.'

'Shh.' Neptune gave him an elbow to the ribs.

Sally touched the table between her and Ms Winner. 'Ms Winner, let me ask this. Where is your sister now?'

A tall man standing behind the seated woman stepped forward. Another blond, though his facial features weren't quite so sharply Winner. 'We've been calling Mavise since we first got word of what happened here. It went to voicemail every time. Two hours ago I had the records pulled from the phone company.' He handed Sally a manilla folder. 'As the family's lawyer I am happy to provide any and everything you need from us.'

Sally pursed her lips. She opened the folder. 'Here? Her phone is here?'

'According to the GPS coordinates the last time it was on. And if you'll note, the last time it was on was the same time as the explosion here.'

'Why?' Zechs asked bluntly. Many sets of light eyes turned to him, all of them tight, wary. 'Why would your sister do this?'

'We've provided her email log as well,' Ms Winner said, no inflection in her voice, her hands clenched tight.

Sally was already reading. 'She's a member of FreeSpace.'

'Not just a member.' Another of the blondes, a young woman in her thirties, who wore pained frown lines to each side of her mouth. 'It started her freshman year at school. It started her freshman year at school. She began participating in protests. She chained herself to a Grabbie, once. Gave interviews in which she said- - truly awful things about Quatre.'

'Don't put a shine on it, Iraia,' the man beside her said flatly. 'She called him a fascist murdering pig. She said his work as a Gundam Pilot shamed us all-- that he's a baby killer and a traitor. And now this eco-terrorist crap. She says he's ripping apart Space for freeloading colonists. As if Winner Enterprises didn't create jobs, feed people. We do good work and Quatre's done his part to make it better.'

Sally stood. 'Thank you for this information. Agent Mèo, let's get a scanner from Local. I want to try and find this phone. Ms Winner, Mr and Mrs Martinez, Mr Winner. All of you. Thank you for bringing us this information. We'll do everything we can to find both Quatre and Mavise.'

Zechs stepped aside for the family as they filed out of the tent. He looked down at his watch and exhaled. Time.

When the Winners had gone the Preventers took turns reading the emails, passing page by page. It was an ugly history in print. Zechs set down the final page with an unsettled stomach. 'She definitely had motive. She hates her brother.'

'And this FreeSpace group egged her on instead of holding her back.' Neptune went back to the earliest emails, scanning them line by line. 'All right, she all but says she's going to do something to the mines. But where does a college girl get bombs?'
'You can get step-by-step instructions from the internet,' Tropic shrugged.

'But the materials?'

'Science labs,' Sally said tiredly. 'Chemicals. And you can order half of what you need from the same place you get the building plans.'

'What I want to know is how she got in here.' Mamba fanned himself with a handful of pages, dark eyes thoughtful. 'According to the foreman, there's no-one here who doesn't have clearance and barcode check-in.'

'I don't think access to the mines would be a problem.' Zechs searched for the roster of people who'd been admitted to the site the morning of the explosions, already knowing her name wasn't on it. 'She could have talked her way on-site. You've heard how people talk about the Winners on this colony. Would an employee really say “no” to a Winner, even if it goes against protocol?'

Mèo was back with a brisk flip of the tent flap, startling all of them. 'Didn't have to go back to Local,' he said excitedly. 'The dock master had a scanner in his office, because the miners all use phones on wi-fi. I just have to calibrate it.'

'Will it find Mavise Winner's phone even if it's turned off?'

'Not on Earth. But in the Colonies, every mobile phone is required to emit a homing signal whether it's on or off. Even a broken phone can emit if the card's not damaged.' Mèo bent over the desk, fiddling with the scanner. 'We should have thought of this hours ago. If the miners kept their phones on them--'

'We might have some idea where they are?' Sally finished. They went into hushed silence.

Mèo bit his lip. 'I don't want to raise hopes too much here. This scanner isn't the most sensitive.'

'But it would give you general position? Back half of the asteroid, front half?'

'Maybe a little better than that. Maybe enough that someone really familiar with the mines might be able to determine tunnels.'

'Good enough for me.' Sally gestured Cobra to her feet. 'Get the foreman back here. He's the best one to tell us, and he'll be discreet.'

Mèo flipped a final switch. 'Ready. Read me off the girl's phone number.'

Neptune had the top sheet. 'Eight-six-three-three-nine-six-eight-six-two-two.'

Mèo typed. Zechs found himself holding his breath. He knew by the flicker of Mèo's sudden grin just before the agent said, 'I have a signal. Here at the docks.'

'So she's here.' Sally paced, tapping her fingers on her elbows. 'Can you tell where specifically? If she stayed to watch the carnage--'

'The mine.' Mèo looked up. 'According to this, she's in the mine itself.'

'Why would she be-- is she pretending to be a rescuer? Wouldn't someone have noticed?' Neptune said blankly.

'Not if she got trapped by her own explosion.' Zechs met Sally's eyes. 'It happened all the time during the war. The Resistance would be caught by their own bombs.'
Sally rubbed both hands through her hair. 'All right,' she said. 'All right. We know she's here, and we know that makes it likely she really did cause the explosions, or she'd have no other reason to be here. So she's either trapped in the mines or dead, in which case it's not our problem, or she's still in the mines because she's got more explosives and she's waiting for-- what? A full commitment of resources? A chance to do bigger damage?'

'There's been hundreds of people swarming the mine since morning,' Mamba protested. 'Why wait?'

'There may be something to that,' Zechs disagreed. 'The second explosion could have been timed to catch the rescue team as it did. And blocked the entrance to the mine. We're only just now breaking through the debris. If she's got a third or fourth bomb on her, she could be holding on to it.'

'And there's nothing we can do about that in any case except quietly alert the rescuers that we believe it's possible.' Sally stilled, arms tight to her chest, eyes narrow as she decided the next steps. 'All right. I want Preventers with every rescue team. We'll go in shifts and you're authorised for a kill shot, but be damned sure before you fire. Neptune, get me Local. I want everyone fully debriefed. And someone find out how much time before those teams will be able to get back into the mine. Better we know before Mavise Winner does.'

'Ma'am,' Neptune answered with hard satisfaction, and left the tent.

**

He was jolted out of a dead sleep by his phone. He dropped it on first fumble and rolled off the cot to his knees to search the floor for it. There--

'Duo?' he croaked. 'What is it?'

'Zechs! Zechs, please, you have to come home!'

'Duo, I can't, I-- what time--'

'They have Heero!'

He fell back onto the concrete and rested his head against the cot. 'What do you mean, they have Heero? Who has Heero?'

The pitch of Duo's agitation rose. *They came to the apartment in the middle of the night and they took him to the Asylum Centre. They said they got an anonymous tip that he's here illegally and they're deporting him. They're fucking deporting him-- I don't know what to do, they won't let me see him, I just-- I can't-- You have to come home, you have to help me. Please, I don't know what else to do, Zechs, I don't fucking know what else to do...'*

The sound of Duo's laboured breathing in his ear was the only backdrop to thoughts that refused to connect. All he could think to say was-- 'I can't possibly leave here, Duo. There's no way.'

'Fine.' Explosive and angry. Then another breath that trembled, and Duo repeated it, softly, barely any voice to it. 'Fine. Yeah. I understand. I have to go.'

'Duo.'
'No. Just-- go do your work. Find Quatre. That's important too.'

'Duo, I would come if I could. I'll make some calls, try to find out--'

'Forget it. I'll figure it out. '

'Will you wait--' He got no further than that. Duo hung up on him.
Eleven

‘From what I can tell, they got an anonymous call alleging that Yuy was violating the conditions of his suspended sentence.’ Zechs reversed his pad for Sally to read. ‘According to protocol, they pick up the suspect and then investigate. Apparently Duo was at work when it happened and Yuy wasn’t allowed a phone call or a note. When Duo got home, realised Yuy was missing, he raised hell with the police until they tracked down what had happened-- the police don’t work directly with the Immigration Bureau, so there wasn’t any notification that Yuy had been picked up pending evaluation. Duo even convinced them to issue a missing persons report before they figured it out.’

‘Brilliant.’ Sally rubbed her eyes. ‘So they’re just holding him? How long is their docket?’

‘I couldn’t get a straight answer out of anyone, but I got the distinct impression that they weren’t putting him to the head of the queue without an executive order.’ Zechs watched the pad go dark with inactivity. ‘It’s got to be connected, Sally. And this time they waited until Preventers were distracted. I think we need to send Spider and Orange back to Sanq, just in case.’

‘I can’t say I don’t agree with you. I’ll authorise it.’ She scraped her lank hair from her forehead and fell back in her chair. ‘When are you going to ask me to put protection back on Duo?’

‘I’m not,’ he said. ‘I’m going to ask you to put me back on Duo.’

‘Zechs, come on—’

‘You don’t need a full force here now. We’re fairly sure of our suspect and the extraction crews are operating without our help.’

‘Fairly sure isn’t case closed,’ Sally pointed out.

‘Ditto on Duo’s case,’ he countered.

‘Relena’s case,’ Sally said, and won that match when Zechs turned away with a sour grunt. ‘The threats we received referred specifically to her. They just mentioned Heero and Duo.’

‘And yet Duo’s been drugged and Yuy is sitting in a detention cell. Any way you look at it, her attack was the least thought out, the least severe. And Quatre Winner—’

‘Your own partner’s not convinced that the mine has anything to do with what’s happened to the other three.’ Sally sighed and crossed her hands behind her head. ‘All right. For the sake of argument. You go running back to Brussels. What exactly are you planning to do? You can’t break Yuy out of jail; we don’t have the authority to countermand local law enforcement.’

‘I can do what Preventers do have the authority to do-- investigate on our own terms. Trace this anonymous tip, for one.’ Zechs nudged the pad just before it went into sleep mode. ‘We said we would protect them and we haven’t. We left them exposed and our perpetrator acted on it.’

‘Damn it,’ she swore, and kicked back her chair. There was no-where to pace in their truck, but she tried it, while Méo stared at his superior with wide eyes. ‘Damn it, this is exactly the problem! We’re spread so thin all we can ever do is rush from one crime scene to another, and forget the notion of ever actually preventing anything. There’s too few of us by half. By more than half. We can’t be police, we can’t be investigators, Zechs. What a mess. What a damn mess.’

‘Ma’am.’ Méo’s tentative voice broke the silence after Sally’s weary tirade. ‘Director. There’s
something happening in the mine.' He pointed at the monitors.

Zechs forced his spine to relax, and bent over his fellow agent's chair to look. He blinked. 'They made it past the junction--'

'Director!' It was Tropic and Neptune, throwing open the doors to the van. 'They've found people,' Neptune reported excitedly. 'A bunch of the first rescue team who got caught in the second blast. First report's a little jumbled, but it sounds like at least some of them are alive.'

'As soon as they've been checked by the medics, I want at least one of them for questioning,' Sally ordered, taking Tropic's assistance down to the ground. Zechs followed, using the advantage of a longer stride to keep even with her as she hurried toward their command tent. 'We need to confirm this Winner girl is here and responsible. And once they're finished clearing out that junction I want our scanners in place-- we need to be scanning for explosives-- and treat it like a forensic crime scene as much as we can manage. If there's any evidence left we need to pick it up now, before it gets trampled or lost.'

'Director.' Zechs caught her by the elbow just before she would have ducked into the tent. Her mouth was a grim line, looking at him, not happy and not quick to tell him what he wanted to hear.

'Director,' he repeated softly. 'Sally. Please. One more man on this scene is not going to be the difference between failure and success. It might be, in Brussels.'

'Don't lecture me, Zechs.' She tugged, and he let her go. 'Don't get me into any trouble down there I can't talk my way out of,' she said, and disappeared into the tent with a flip of the dusty tarp.

'Wind?' Tropic asked him. He waved crossly at the agitated motes swirling around them. 'You're out?'

'You're leaving?' Neptune regarded him with cautious surprise. 'Why?'

'The Gundam Pilots have been attacked again. Yuy's been picked up for deportation to the colonies.' Zechs glanced down at his watch, waver for a second. If the miners hadn't reached a safety curtain, they were long dead-- but even if they had, Zechs personally wasn't doing anything that couldn't be done by someone else. 'Keep me informed?'

'Of course,' Tropic said.

'Hey, Wind.' It was Spider, leaving the tent followed closely by his partner. 'I hear we're headed back to Earth. Knew that dritsekk would be back, yeah?'

'Yeah.' Orange gave him a lazy wink-- approval, he supposed, for what amounted, his very guilty stomach said, to abandonment of his post. Spider and Orange, at least, had the luxury of knowing how very important their own task was-- Relena absolutely had to be protected. Duo--

'Are they worth it?' When he looked sharply at her, Neptune dropped her voice. 'Wind-- honestly. Maybe this is something the Gundam Pilots should sort out for themselves. This is not on the same level as someone tossing bombs at a mine full of innocent bystanders.'

'This is still our case,' he told Neptune coolly. 'As much as, no different than, what's happening at the mines.'

'No different?' she repeated. 'Not more personal?'

He resented that. He resented it, even as it stuck somewhere in his throat-- a little too close to true.
Not a good time for self-doubt. The arguments he'd made for Sally were all still true, and she'd agreed, or she wouldn't have let him go. Someone had an agenda. Deporting Yuy could have no other purpose.

'Keep us posted,' he said, aiming that somewhere between Tropic and Neptune, and turned his back. Spider and Orange fell in behind him. Orange clapped him on the shoulder, but it was all Zechs could do not to shake him off. He knew he would feel better about this when he landed, when he could do something-- but right then, it didn't feel very good at all.

**

It took a galling fourteen hours to land at De Gaulle. Spider and Orange debarked their shuttle for the short plane ride to Sanq, leaving Zechs to wrangle for a rental car back to Brussels. He made the drive in a state of short-tempered weariness, weaving through mid-day traffic and relying on his horn more than his usual. The car's internal GPS took him on a circuitous route through Brussels and misled him on parking at the Asylum Centre; when he finally pulled into a visitor's space in the garage beneath the building, he had to give himself five minutes to sit with his eyes closed, searching for the equilibrium he knew he would need. It didn't come easily. He knew he should go home, change into a fresh uniform, sleep for a few hours-- knew that Duo would never forgive him for a selfish delay. Knew that, rationally, that shouldn't matter, not if it was going to affect him, affect his effectiveness-- but he still made himself move, swing tired legs out of the car, pocket the rental keys, scrape together the energy to stand.

He followed a half-dozen signs through a maze of small lobbies and blank, cream-coloured corridors before he finally found a desk. Unmanned. A computer touch-screen faced the visitor-side. Zechs selected English language, and received instructions to sign himself in. There was an option for visiting law enforcement, but not Preventers, and the computer stubbornly refused to let him enter his agent codename. Frustrated, he left the guestbook blank, and simply took himself past the desk to the offices behind it.

'Agent Wind, Preventers,' he pre-empted the first person he saw, a uniformed woman of middle age who reacted with surprise to see him turning a corner toward her. He flashed his badge, leaving it out just long enough for her eyes to widen even further. 'I'm here regarding Heero Yuy. He's been brought in to your facility.'

'Are you authorised?' she asked hesitantly, looking to her left. Toward a closed door, and a camera above it. Zechs looked at it too, evaluating just how much caution she was displaying, and deciding it had the cringe of someone who knew they were in the wrong. He put out his badge again, a confrontational foot from her nose.

'Yes,' he replied icily. 'Why don't you take me to someone who can answer my questions.'

She glanced at the camera again. 'Of-- of course, sir. Agent.' That was not the door to which she walked him, though. She about-faced, keeping him in her line of sight. She didn't touch the taser gun at her side, but her hand twitched toward it. He noted all of that, and followed her without further comment to the door furthest from them. He waited pointedly for her to open it, and gestured her to precede him.

A waiting room. There was an old man waiting, dozing, in a chair by a television, and a pair of young children playing with a basket of building blocks, unsupervised but quiet. And a familiar
face, by the eponymous desk, arguing with another uniformed Asylum worker.

'Mr Van den Broeck,' Zechs said, diverting the man's attention. His own escort abandoned him, sliding sideways as he ignored her, and then hurrying back through the door already grabbing at her comm unit to whisper urgently. Zechs let her go, knowing she would be reporting to whoever would eventually be able to talk to him. He put out a hand for Duo's friend, but was shocked when Van den Broeck grabbed it in both of his, relief dripping off him.

'Thank God you are here,' Van den Broeck said, gripping him tightly. 'Oh, thank God. I was worried he hadn't called you and the local station would not tell me where you were.'

'Sir.' Zechs squeezed his fingers, and extricated himself cautiously. 'Forgive me, but that seems to be a change of heart from our last encounter.'

Van den Broeck paused, before a grim smile flattened his lips. 'In this instance, Mr Merquise, no-one is happier to see you than I. If you can talk Duo out of this madness, I will never say another sour word of you.'

So he'd been right in that assumption, at least. Duo didn't have it in him not to do something, and he knew enough about Duo's impulsiveness to guess it was bad at best, and dangerous at worst.

'What has he done?'

'Tried to stop a train by throwing himself on the tracks,' Van den Broeck answered, grimly indeed. 'But he will listen to you as he will not to me. Now if only we can get in to see him--'

'That,' Zechs informed him, 'will not be an issue.'

'Mr Merquise, I find myself warming to you more every minute.'

**

'It's mine,' Duo repeated.

Zechs could have struck the wall; as it was, his knuckles rested there wishing they could. 'Will you stop saying that.'

'Why? It's true.' Duo tapped on the table. 'When can I see him?'

'You're not seeing anyone until we clear this up, Mister Maxwell.'

'I'm not a mister,' Duo pointed out, so sweetly that Zechs ground his teeth. 'I'm twenty. According to you people, I can't even vote.'

'You can't vote because you are a felon, Mr Maxwell.' The Immigration Bureau had sent lawyers--three lawyers. The only one who talked was the Special Prosecutor. And Duo. They couldn't shut Duo up, not himself, not Van den Broeck, not common sense.

'I'm not a felon,' Duo said, a hard edge to that flat statement. 'I wasn't convicted in criminal court. I just don't have the same rights as you do. But I have computers, and I have internet. The connection and the machines in my apartment all belong to me.'

'But Mr Yuy was the one using the computer and the connection,' said the Special Prosecutor.
'To do schoolwork. You have forensic specialists. A five-year-old could pull up the history files and tell you when the computer was being used to contact the colonies.'

'Duo.' Van den Broeck put his hand over Duo's and leant down to whisper to him. Duo's expression did not change, but his eyes went to the left, and stayed there. Van den Broeck straightened. 'My client has spoken freely to you but reserves the right not to incriminate himself. You will direct all future questions to myself, as his lawyer.'

'I think Mr Maxwell has been plenty clear,' the Special Prosecutor retorted. 'He claims he is guilty. He wishes to be arrested. I have no difficulty granting that wish.'

'Your pardon,' Zechs interrupted. 'Arresting the man at the centre of a Preventers investigation would be incredibly detrimental to our ability to complete--'

'An investigation that stretches months?' the woman returned. 'I think an arrest might not impede you too terribly much.'

Zechs had been clinging to the end of his rope for hours, and that was the last he could stand for. He pulled his badge from his belt clip and slammed it down to Duo's table. 'You may step outside, Special Prosecutor. I am invoking Chapter 14 Section 27a of Parliamentary Code. My investigation takes priority over yours.'

She was taken aback at that. So was Van den Broeck, who looked at him sharply. The other lawyers exchanged long, uneasy looks.

'Leave,' Zechs said. 'I will inform you when you may continue to question Mr Maxwell.'

Van den Broeck waited for the door to close; he rose from Duo's small table and crossed the room to the monitor beside the door. He flicked it off, ensuring their privacy. He said, 'It will not be long before they look at Chapter 14 and realise it does not give Preventers authority over local matters, Agent.'

'It gives me twenty-four hours in the event that someone involved in a Preventers investigation does something incredibly stupid.' He reclipped his badge and planted both hands on the table. 'Duo, what the hell are you doing?'

Duo shoved back his chair so hard the legs scraped on the tile. Zechs dropped his head, forcing himself to breathe. Duo was leaning against the plain brick wall when he straightened, one hand fisted in his pocket, the other tugging his short ponytail. That was a nervous habit. Which meant Duo was smart enough still to be nervous. Good.

'I know that Heero was contacting people in the colonies,' Zechs told him. 'Quatre Winner told me that himself. He said he'd spoken to Heero about what was happening down here.'

Duo's cheeks went hollow. He didn't answer right away. 'That's circumstantial. Hear-say.'

'It will stand in court,' Van den Broeck said from behind him. 'On the word of a Preventers agent.'

'Then you just won't tell them.'

'I have to disclose that if you're arrested, Duo.' Zechs rubbed his sandy eyes. 'We'll have to turn over everything we found when we looked at your computers. And Heero's.'

'They're not Heero's computers,' Duo repeated stubbornly. 'I bought them. I even still have receipts. I loaned them to him, but I set them up, I networked my apartment with his, and I used his
computer when I was at his apartment. Heero did not use them to contact anyone in the colonies. He wouldn't be that dumb. We swore we wouldn't.'

'Yes, you did swear,' Van den Broeck said. 'You signed an agreement, and your freedom is contingent on that agreement. And I believe you have never violated the terms of your contract.'

'I did.' Duo shrugged carelessly, but it wasn't careless. 'Obviously. Someone did it from my computers. So it must be me.'

'Stop it,' Zechs snapped. 'Do you understand what's going to happen here? Preventers wasn't interested in prosecuting either of you for banned activity, but we found it. Do you realise that? Heero's not just skirting the rules to talk with old friends. He's contacting questionable and possibly illegal sources. He's tracking God knows what-- but he's tracking a lot of it. We left him alone because that wasn't what we were looking for, but the Special Prosecutor--'

'Will arrest him and deport him under the terms of our parole.' Duo faced the lone window in their room and folded both arms on the sill. 'You know what happens then? A fat lot of nothing. Because he's not counted as a citizen of L1, but that's where they'll send him, because that's the place he launched from, during Operation Meteor. So they'll load him on a plane and they'll shove him off at the dock and because they don't want him on L1, they'll put him in a cell in the Asylum Centre there and that's exactly where he'll sit for years. Years. It'll take them years to decide what to do with him, and maybe they'll never decide, because it's easy to forget about someone you don't have to look at. I'm not letting that happen to him.'

'You may not have a choice.'

'If he didn't do it, he's not guilty.' Duo touched the window with the back of his hand. The warmth of his skin left a patch of clear on the winter-frosted glass. 'If he's not guilty, they'll let him go.'

'Duo, I cannot in good conscience allow you to do this.' Van den Broeck touched Duo on the shoulder. 'I will try to see Heero. Shall we ask him whether he agrees with this plan of yours?'

'Heero will do what I tell him to do.' Duo said it quietly, but his voice was like steel, and Zechs had the sinking feeling that he was speaking an absolute truth. Just as Duo had accepted Heero's judgment in moving back into the same apartment, Heero would accept this sacrifice. And there was nothing Zechs could do to stop it.

'There has to be an alternative,' Zechs tried.

'You're looking at the alternative.' Duo exhaled, and it shook just a little. 'I'm not saying I like it. Just that I've thought hard about it and I don't see another way.'

'I won't stop trying.'

'I'll be hoping.' Duo set his chin down on his hands. 'Just not expecting.'

Van den Broeck was the first to give up. 'I will try to see Heero,' he said again, heavily. 'We will see what he wishes to do.' He squeezed Duo's shoulder, and left, closing the door again softly behind him.

'You would really do this for him?' Zechs asked. 'Give up everything. Duo, I just... I don't think I can understand this.'

'There's no explanation. It's just right and wrong.' Duo drew a streak down the window pane, and faced him finally. 'I can deal with it. He couldn't. He would shut down in there. You know that.
You know what he's like just being stuck here, and here he can walk around and do what he wants. If they lock him up it'll kill him. It won't kill me.'

'He should have thought of that before he used your computer for illegal activity, then.' He wanted to go to Duo, but there might still be cameras on them, if not audio. 'It's not your job to dodge this bullet for him.'

'There's no explanation, Zechs.'

'You're a damn idiot.' He cleared his throat. 'I'm going. I'll be back. Try not to claim responsibility for anything else while I'm gone.'

The Special Prosecutor was waiting for him in the corridor—fuming silently until the very second he opened the door, and then she was on him. 'There is nothing in Chapter 14 which says I cannot place him under arrest,' she began.

'After my twenty-four hours are up.' He stopped her protest with an upraised hand. 'I can't stop you from detaining him. He's not going anywhere. Twenty-four hours won't hurt your case, but it gives me time to salvage mine. Can we agree that this doesn't actually put us at cross-purposes?'

One of her lawyers whispered to her. The mighty frown creasing her brows eased just slightly as she looked at him. 'Perhaps,' she allowed. 'You will be wanting access as well to Yuy?'

'Yes. And his legal representation--'

'Mr Van den Broeck claims to be Yuy's attorney. I've given him access.' She crossed her arms over her bust, the sharp lapels of her suit creating a sort of winged frame for her sullen grimace. 'What exactly do you think to accomplish in twenty-four hours? Wriggle them free of their violations?'

'Either one or the other of them is guilty,' he shot back, before it occurred to him that drawing that demarcation might not be good for Duo in the long run. But neither was it going to end well if she had the opportunity to paint Duo and Heero both with the same brush. 'Would it be possible for me to see the formal charges?'

'They are not formal yet,' she admitted, reluctantly. 'Charges will not be entered until we have fully investigated the truth of the allegations made against them.'

'Against Heero Yuy. The anonymous tip only mentioned him.'

'Only him,' she said, so grudgingly that Zechs began to wonder just what that tip had said, and how long she'd been waiting to get even that much to go on. It might have been operations as usual to pick up Heero based on a tip, even to hold him pending full investigation, but to have a Special Prosecutor on hand within a day? There was more at work here than just a parole violation. She wanted Yuy out of Brussels. Yuy and Duo both. And since there was no indication it was a personal malice, it had to be institutional— it had to be coming from someone in authority. From people who had never been happy to be stuck with two Gundam Pilots, and who were only too eager to take even a flimsy pretext to remove them.

'When you have the charges,' Zechs said, at his mildest courtesy. 'Please forward them. Preventers will, of course, require them before we can supply any of our files.'

Her frown reappeared. 'Of course,' she echoed.

He inclined his head to her. 'Now. Mr Yuy's cell is in which direction?'
Cell, as it happened, was quite the apt description. Zechs had been expecting something on the level of comfort and modernity as the room in which Duo was being held-- a finished and furnished room with natural light and modern conveniences. Yuy's cell was a scene out of a prison novel. There was a cot with a thin pre-fab mattress, a drain set against the wall for a toilet, a sink and small mirror, and an inset overhead light. No window, no desk to sit at. A chair had evidently been found for Van den Broeck, a folding plastic piece, and a uniformed guard came hurrying with another for Zechs. But it was Yuy that concerned Zechs, who had the sudden sinking feeling Duo might just have been right in his fundamental assumption. Yuy was haggard and dead-eyed, sitting slumped against the wall on his cot. He didn't look when the opened the barred door for Zechs.

'He has not eaten,' Van den Broeck told him. 'Or will not, more precisely.'

Zechs had been prepared for more stubbornness of Duo's sort. Not this kind of radical self-abnegation. Not a lack of hope. He knocked on the door, and the uniform outside slid back the face panel. 'Bring him a meal,' he said. 'Now.'

'Heero,' Van den Broeck was saying softly. 'Heero, please. This does no good, yes? You must not give them this triumph. You are stronger than this.'

'Surely you've survived worse,' Zechs added gruffly. The more he looked at it, the more it disturbed him to see this hollowness in Yuy. Social anxiety, he could understand-- anger like Duo's, he could understand. Even fatalism wouldn't have seemed so out of place. 'In the war--'

'What do you want.' Yuy's voice was rusty, even so soft. His hands were flat on the thighs of his blue jumpsuit, limp.

'To be sure you are all right,' Van den Broeck answered. 'To be sure you are not mistreated. To be sure you are ready to fight this.'

'What's the point.' Yuy shifted, a sign of life at least, Zechs thought, but it was only that little bit of movement, and ceased immediately, as if even that were pointless. 'They took the computers,' he added slowly. 'Someone knew about the computers.'

'Preventers did not report anything,' Zechs said defencively.

'The IP address you found. You never tracked the owner?'

'A fake account.' Zechs sank slowly into his chair. 'John Smith. We tried to trace the money, but it went no-where.'

Yuy gave up on that lead as if it had only been a rote question anyway, his eyes dropping back to the wall. 'How long will I be here before they transfer me?'

Van den Broeck glanced at Zechs, who could only shrug. 'I would think a few weeks at least,' the barrister replied finally. 'It will take them that long to determine the truth of their accusations. Perhaps a month. Heero, why did you do it? You must have known this could happen. I warned you personally that it would.'

'And that it wouldn't reflect solely on you,' Zechs added flatly.

That got him a long look. Yuy blinked once. 'He's here?'

'He's been here for hours, concocting all manner of lies for you.'

Yuy's customary scowl made an uneasy reappearance. 'I didn't ask him for that.'
That was a little like failing to predict the sun would rise in the east. Which made it all the more ridiculous that Zechs hadn't predicted it, either. 'He's claiming all responsibility.'

'I didn't ask him to do that.'

'Nevertheless, he is doing it.' Van den Broeck moved his chair closer to Yuy's cot. 'Will you help me help you both? I need to know what you did, so that I can offer the best defence. Get you the best terms. Perhaps if I am good enough at this, neither of you will be deported, yes?'

That moved something in Yuy. His jaw clenched hard, his fingers curling tight over his knees. 'Datasets,' he said finally. 'I was trying to access government datasets.'

'Why?' Zechs probed. 'Bearing in mind that while curiosity isn't a good answer, it's better than you telling us you were planning to use it for something.'

'Curiosity.' Yuy gave him a sudden burning glare. 'Are you even aware how much data the Parliament kept from Romafeller, OZ, the Federation? There are a dozen zettabytes of unique datasets just predating the war. Ask Parliament why they keep that-- and don't believe them when they tell you it's just “curiosity”. Better yet, look at it for yourself.'

'We are getting afield,' Van den Broeck murmured. 'So you were accessing these datasets? Classified materials in secure nets.'

'Yes.' Then, just as abruptly as it had appeared, Yuy's fire died. 'Duo didn't know. I didn't tell him. He would have asked me to stop.'

Zechs was grinding his teeth already, but he couldn't stop one final tired snap from slipping out. 'And it never occurred to you what kind of trouble you could get in?' he demanded. 'You had to know better.'

'We weren't guilty.' Yuy put his head back against the wall, his eyes closed. 'Not of what they claimed we were. Our sentences were wrong. And so is what they're still doing. But none of that matters, does it. We'll always be the ones at fault.'

Whatever more might have been said was interrupted by a knock at the door. A moment later, the maglocks clicked off, and the door swung open. It was a uniform, and he was carrying a tray of covered dishes.

'Thank you,' Van den Broeck said. He rose to take the tray, and brought it to Yuy's cot. 'There now. Please eat, Heero. You must keep up your energy. You are a grumpy young man when you are hungry.' He even dared to ruffle Yuy's hair, an act Zechs would have thought could only result in dismemberment, but Yuy allowed it with only a little hunch of his shoulders. Zechs shook his own head, and stopped the guard with a wave.

'I'm going,' he said. 'Mr Van den Broeck is to have access whenever he wants, is that understood? To both Mr Yuy and Mr Maxwell.'

'Yes, Agent.'

'Agent Wind.' Van den Broeck followed him into the hall. Zechs gave the guard a long look, and with a flush the young man backed away, giving them privacy to speak. 'What will you do?'

'Track the tipper. And try to prove that only one of them--' He hesitated. 'I'm going to have to choose which one of them to save, aren't I.'
Van den Broeck rubbed both hands over his cheeks. 'We can pray for divine intervention. I think we had better pray very hard.'

'I find it hard to disagree right now.' He touched his watch, his phone. His phone. He pulled it from his belt, staring down at it, not quite sure that the thing happening in his head was an idea-- not even half-baked, Duo would say, but--

'Mr Merquise?' Van den Broeck asked him, concerned. 'Are you all right?'

'It may not be divine intervention,' Zechs told him, 'but it might be divine inspiration. I think I have an idea. Excuse me-- I have to call my sister.'
Headquarters was eerily empty. The lone guard at the entry station checked his badge and nodded him through, and he spotted one of the admin support staff at a desk in an unlit office, but he was otherwise alone as he walked the halls. He had to find his key in his duffel to unlock his own department's door, and felt blindly across the blank wall until he found the switch for the lights. They came up, dim and blue, in night setting. Zechs rubbed his eyes and let the door fall shut behind him.

While he waited for his computer to boot he made coffee in the small staff lounge and unearthed a frozen lunch he'd left there weeks earlier. Eating it almost put him to sleep. He sat slumped with his chin on his fist as he called up the e-case on his network and slowly sipped away his coffee as he reviewed.

Telephonic threats received by Relena's Sanqian bodyguard, routed immediately to Preventers. Three calls over two days, the same essential message, differently worded each time: the Princess consorts with the enemies of peace and democracy. Until she disavows these monsters, she will be in danger.

It was the third message that specifically named the 'monsters'-- Gundam Pilots. Every moment she spends with them endangers her further. More visits to Brussels than Zechs had been aware of, and apparently quite a lot of them had included side trips to Heero Yuy's apartment. None long enough to include-- well, he didn't think his sister, or Yuy for that matter, were the type for a quick dalliance, and according to Duo, at least, they hadn't been in a relationship for a year. So whatever those few short hours here and there had amounted to, it was likeliest to be friendship, not romance. But the message had named both Yuy and Duo as 'corrupt influences', and so both had fallen under Preventers' circle of protection.

The network attack they had-- well, that Yuy had-- captured on his home computers had been right on the tail of the threats. Preventers had been actively investigating, but the IP address Yuy had managed to unearth had been their first real clue. Searching for what? Just another shot across the bow-- something that hadn't so much harmed as warned, like drugging Duo's drink? No information stolen, no bank accounts accessed, just in and out to prove it could be done?

But no, no quite. Whether or not it could be proved was one thing, but Zechs knew in his gut that whoever had invaded Yuy's computers had been the same one to call in the anonymous tip that Yuy was hacking classified data. Had noticed it during that first attack, and saved the information for when it would be most useful, for the day when Preventers weren't there, when Yuy could be got rid of with almost no effort at all.

But why wait? In fact, if the goal had been to somehow dispatch Yuy and Duo, to separate them from Relena, why bother with a threat, with those slowly-escalating tricks that never really warranted lockdown or evacuation? Months had passed between the original threat and this move to incarcerate Yuy. Why give them so much time to react? It was almost-- it was almost an honourable pause in combat, giving an opponent a chance to recover on equal terms.

Miles Pargan had introduced him to that concept. The difference between violence and engagement. Violence existed only to reach an ending. Engagement existed to reach an understanding. You only had the measure of a man if you engaged him honourably and defeated him on equal terms.

Treize had believed in honour, too-- the way a man believed in things like alien life in distant
galaxies. Something far away that was interesting enough, but not something that grew from an internal passion. The first time he'd ever sparred with Treize, he'd won, disarmed his new friend, offered him a hand off the floor; and found himself flat on his back with his own epee at his chest a moment later. I hope you learn your way out of that before it gets you killed, Treize had said mildly.

Treize's particular brand of practicality had gone to the grave with him. They venerated him in those Christmas broadcasts Duo hated so much; Zechs hated them too, but wearily, wishing there was room for a narrative that didn't cast its characters in such black and white. But Treize had always counted on humanity's reductionist impulses. Honour, maybe. The belief that, given a chance, humanity was capable of meeting itself on an even playing field and deciding not to fire.

Zechs had fired. He'd fired on the man who'd arranged his father's assassination; he'd fired on Earth for being the symbol of all his own failings; he'd fired on Treize for standing in his way. He'd always fired. Treize had always known he would. Honour. A code that required veneration or abnegation of the self. Zechs had been on both ends of that, and made his greatest mistakes in those extremes.

If you didn't do it for honour-- sometimes you did it for loyalty. Duo lying for Yuy. Yuy telling the truth for Duo.

Corrupt influences. That was the key. He was sure of it. He stared at the transcript of that phone message until his eyes watered. Corrupt influences. Every moment she spends with them endangers her further.

Preventers had read that as an active threat. What if it had been a plea? The caller had seen Relena in danger, not from himself, but from Yuy and Duo-- no, not even them specifically. What they represented. The Gundam Pilots. Enemies of peace and democracy. Man's reductionist impulse at work again. Yuy and Duo were nothing more than the movement they had once represented-- and Relena wasn't a person, but a lodestone, an ideal. An ideal in danger of corruption.

Almost as soon as he thought it, the idea began to lose coherence. Honour and loyalty were concepts, not criminal motivations. Weren't they? Radical drives that led unanimously to destruction when carried to the extreme. But if someone out there really believed that Relena needed to be saved, how would you expose her corruptors? Exposing Yuy's illegal activity-- revealing him as someone who would never obey the law, would never stop fighting a war that was over and lost. Exposing Duo... Exposing Duo as what? Drugging him had been almost worthless, as a gambit. No lasting harm at all.

So what had the point of it been? Zechs had been with him the entire time, and there was nothing to suggest Preventers were playing anything but a cameo in this scenario. The attack had been random, not timed for Preventers' absence as Yuy's deporting was. If Zechs hadn't been there to see it, no-one might ever have known about it, even Duo, who had had no memory of it.

But Zechs had been there. Maybe that wasn't accidental. Maybe he'd been meant to see it. Zechs pulled up his own statement from the case file, willing it to regurgitate some kind of meaning. They had been eating dinner. Duo had been upset about Christmas, but had calmed, and they'd been relaxed, at their ease. Duo had had a drink. Duo had gone to the toilets, returned acting inebriated. He'd walked Duo back to the garage to get a car--

He'd lied in his statement to Preventers. Or rather, he hadn't told the entire story. He'd walked Duo back to the garage, yes, but he'd omitted that Duo had tried to seduce him in the backseat, omitted how near they'd come to sex that night. He'd been trying to spare Duo's reputation, spare himself a little unnecessary embarrassment, and it hadn't really been relevant. He'd realised Duo was drugged
But if he hadn't realised Duo had been drugged?

Duo had been acting so loose, so different. He'd only stopped it because he'd thought Duo would regret it by sober morning. But if they had gone through with it, and Duo had waked in the morning with no memory of it or believing he'd been taken advantage of when he was vulnerable, given Duo's temper, what then? Their relationship might not have survived it.

It would have driven them apart. It would have cut Duo adrift from Preventers. And Zechs might not have rushed back from L4 to help him, if they'd been on the outs; Duo might never have called him for help. Both Yuy and Duo might have been irrevocably deported by the time Preventers even had wind of it happening.

He slept at his desk for a few short hours, waking sandy-eyed and cloudy-headed. He showered in the stalls in the gym and dressed in a spare uniform he kept in his locker. His hands were swollen and his stomach growled, both usual after-effects of Space travel, but he didn't have much time to deal with it. His twenty-four hour deadline had shrunk by ten. He checked with Forensics, but they didn't have anything yet on the tape of the anonymous tip to the Special Prosecutor. He checked his email as well, hoping for good news from L4, but there was nothing there, either.

This time he had no trouble finding someone to take him to Duo at the Asylum Centre. Duo had been moved-- and Zechs did not think it was a good move-- to a cell like Yuy's. In the rolled-up sleeves of his blue jumpsuit he looked less like a prisoner than the grease monkey he claimed to be; at least until Zechs looked at the barred window behind him.

'Can I see him yet?' was the first thing Duo asked.

'Do you understand that by taking the fall for him, you will likely never see him again?' Zechs gestured for his escort to leave a folding chair for him, and then they were alone. Zechs sank onto his seat. 'How are you doing?'

'I'm fine.' The corners of Duo's lips turned up, but didn't stay there. 'You look rough. I'm sorry.'

'And I'm serious. Do you really understand the consequences of what you're doing?'

'Accidentally breaking up with you.' Duo rubbed his thumb over his fist, and dropped his head back to the brick behind him. 'Which kind of sucks. I appreciate all the derring-do on my behalf, though. I don't think I'm going to get as lucky again as I have been with you.'

'Let's save the eulogy for when we really have no hope.'

'Wow, you're seriously pissed at me.' Duo avoided his eyes, picking at his fingernail. 'He's my friend. I'd do the same thing for you.'

'Not everything should escalate to life or death, Duo. There were so many other ways to handle this that wouldn't end with you in jail.' Zechs rubbed his own hands, trying not to sigh. 'They'll send you to L2, I gather.'

'They'll let me out eventually. There's not enough room for the real baddies on L2, much less people like me. They might not even keep me at all.'

'If they do let you out, it won't be for free. And the people who will want you the most will be the ones who want to use you.'
'I know.'

'And? Duo, please just make me feel like you aren't letting this play out on purpose.'

'You know me better,' Duo said flatly, his eyes snapping up to Zechs' face. 'I'm not a revolutionary, not anymore. The last thing I want is another war.'

'You think you'll have a choice?'

'You really suck at pep talks.' Duo pulled his knees up to his chest and hugged them close. 'Be nice to me. I probably won't ever see you again, either.'

Zechs was spared a reply by a knock at the door. Van den Broeck, who looked almost as tired as Zechs felt. He was let in by one of the uniforms, and brought with him Duo's breakfast. Duo gave him room to settle on the cot, and accepted an apple silently. Van den Broeck smiled somberly down at him.

'Any progress?' he asked Zechs.

'Unfortunately not.' Zechs gazed down at his hands. 'I believe whoever is behind this-- I think that-- possibly this person is politically opposed to you. Maybe a radical Pacifist.'

'Radical and Pacifist don't usually go into the same sentence,' Duo observed. His voice was just a bit husky, and he wasn't looking at Zechs again. This time Zechs did sigh.

'It does exist,' he answered. 'They have anarchist tendencies, particularly in Europe. They advocate combative non-violence. As a group, they're fanatical about Relena. If it is a radical Pacifist, though, I don't know what to make of the bomb on L4. Maybe if there had been no-one in the mine, it would fit within their philosophy. But not at the risk of so many lives.'

'Guess by that logic Heero'n me are lucky.' Duo rolled the apple between his palms slowly, caressing its dappled skin. 'You think they'll find him? Quatre?'

'Maybe a lack of news on that front is a good sign.' Van den Broeck sat silently watching their byplay, but Zechs couldn't ask him to go. So Zechs ignored it instead. He crouched at Duo's feet and covered Duo's hands with his own. 'You still have time to retract your statement. Please, Duo. You're not saving Heero. You're just ruining your own life.'

'You don't know that. And even if it were true, it would still be worth trying.' Duo freed his fingers, letting the apple slide into Zechs' hand. 'During the war. Before the war-- hell. My entire life. We survived because we protected each other from our weaknesses. Maybe that's the only reason we survived. I wish you understood. But even if you don't, this is the only way I know.'

'It might have been the exhaustion. He'd given up only a very few times in his life. If he didn't get out of Duo's presence immediately, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from adding to the tally. He managed just a civil nod to Van den Broeck as he shoved to his feet. The wait for the guard to open the door seemed interminable, and he couldn't draw breath until he stood in the corridor outside.

'I need a phone,' he told his escort. 'I need to speak with the Special Prosecutor.'

'We have an office you could use, Agent.'

'Thank you.' He discovered the apple in his hand. He passed it awkwardly to the guard. 'Let me know if Mr Van den Broeck requests to speak with me.'
He used an encrypted laptop, with added network protection, and the highest security credentials Preventers had access to. He had only an average education in computers, but he was sure enough of one thing. If Yuy was right about secret government datasets, then Yuy wasn't the only one who knew about them, and the best place to find out who else knew was the internet.

He ran a dozen searches simultaneously, burning through the net and returning results by the thousands. He eliminated half by narrowing his parameters-- ridding himself of the conspiracy websites, the discussion forums dead longer than a year, anything produced by an official news source. He eliminated half again simply by binning anything too small to be worthwhile. It still left him with more than ten thousand leads. With grim determination he settled himself in for a long read.

There was widespread belief, at least, that such datasets did exist. Not just the publicly released datasets of financial or populace information he knew of; that was innocent enough, and fairly useless for anything more than number crunching and the occasional cross-reference. Long years of war and military rule had shuttered early efforts at transparency. The Parliament had released plenty of data in raw, machine-readable form, but innovation was slow and the data were not particularly useful outside their mother-agencies. Secret data could be anything. Reports by Parliamentary research services were not generally made public, nor had prisoner of war lists been. Watch lists. And God knew Treize had employed shredders by the hundreds to destroy documents seized from every Alliance base he'd destroyed. Zechs was one of a very few who knew that Une had authorised the Trojan virus that had wiped out OZ servers in the aftermath of Libra. Of course data would have survived, and there were likely some very ugly things to be learnt in them, but was it truly a sinister thing, to keep it secret? Or did it only look sinister if you'd been raised to abhor and distrust a government that regularly abused its citizens?

He interrupted his reading only when he had to step out to the toilet. His head felt stuffed with newly learnt information, but none of it came together in sense. He leaned wearily against a cool tile wall with one hand trailing under the cold water from the sink faucet. He checked his mobile again, but it was silent, with no alerts waiting. No news.

'Agent.'

'Mr Van den Broeck.' Zechs twisted the spigot off. 'Are you--'

'Wondering how your investigation is coming.' The tall man joined him, hands in his trouser pockets. His suit was rumpled, and he, too, had beard growing in for lack of grooming, salt-white speckling his chin.

Zechs dried his hands on the towel hanging over the sink. 'I spoke to the Special Prosecutor. I think she can be convinced that Duo's only acting out of loyalty to Yuy. Whether that will count enough in her tally of special circumstances, I don't know. But if they can't establish forensically that Duo was really the one using those computers, in the end I don't think they'll have a case.'

'I agree. He may sit in here while they sort this out, but I think in the end they will be lenient. He has worked hard in Brussels, you are aware. He has a good job, he gives his time more than just Small Arms. I think we will not have difficulty finding character witnesses, if it comes to that.'
'Heero?' Van den Broeck asked then. Zechs only shook his head. Van den Broeck acknowledged that with a dip of his head. 'Well,' he said. 'I have a few contacts on L1. I will see if perhaps something can be done for him in the colonies. They might be able to ease his conditions there.'

'I hope your friends are very good lawyers.' Zechs faced the door, but his feet didn't move. 'What an ignominious way for this to end.'

'Their lives were never going to be easy, Mr Merquise. Some very special people will always struggle in this world, even when they only want to do good.' Van den Broeck's pocket began to beep. 'Please pardon me,' he muttered, turning slightly away as he liberated a mobile phone. Zechs stepped back to give him room, and ducked toward the door so Van den Broeck could have privacy. He made it just to the threshold when his own mobile began to vibrate. He pulled it from its clip and read the number. He covered a sudden smile with his hand, drawing a deep breath. He set his phone to his ear.

'You have no idea how glad I am to hear from you,' he said. 'I hope it's good news.'

'Very. We're just pulling up to the garage.'

'I'm on my way to meet you.' Zechs turned, and found Van den Broeck right behind him. 'Our miracle has arrived,' he told the man, gripping his arm tightly. 'Are you ready for a show?'

'What have you managed, Mr Merquise?'

'It's Zechs. Hurry. We'll want to be on hand to do the shouting.'

They came clattering down the steps just as a dark car with tinted windows pulled to a stop in the restricted zone in front of the Asylum Centre. An excess of weary paranoia made Zechs pause long enough to scan nearby rooftops for snipers, but that thought didn't last long. He had the car door open as soon as the vehicle stopped, and reached his hand inside.

Relena slid to the kerb in his hold, her fingers wrapping around his as she leant up to kiss his cheek. 'How much time do we have?' she asked him.

'Not much. I was starting to worry.'

'You?' She smiled tightly up at him. 'Never you, Zechs.'

'Excuse me, yes?' A head of dark hair poked itself out of the open car door. 'We are going inside, are we not?'

'You brought your boyfriend?' he asked Relena softly.

Her cheeks pinkened. 'He isn't my boyfriend,' she replied with dignity. 'But he is a good friend.' Her gaze went over his shoulder. 'Who's that?'

'Mr Pieter Van den Broeck,' he introduced them, 'may I introduce Relena Peacecraft, the Princess Royal of Sanq. Oh-- and Troyes Lefèvre, her companion.'

Van den Broeck's eyes were very wide indeed. 'I am honoured,' he stuttered, and gave himself a shake. 'We have never met, your Highness, but you are very generous to my organisation.'

'Yes, Mr Van den Broeck, it has been my pleasure. And Duo and Heero both speak so highly of
you, I feel I already know you.' Relena's smile was dazzling, and Van den Broeck blinked back, obviously charmed. Zechs smiled himself at the now-familiar scene; he'd watched his sister collect hundreds with nothing more than those dimples and a kind word. How could he not feel hope again, seeing that?

'Let's hurry,' he reminded her gently. 'I want them to have the time they need to review the documents.'

'Yes,' Relena squeezed his hand. He kissed her again, impulsively, and escorted her up the steps to the Centre. 'The Special Prosecutor?'

'I asked her to meet me at six.' He checked his mobile for the time. 'Not long now. And the Minister-President?'

'I informed him of my visit. He's coming.'

'What have you planned?' Van den Broeck demanded, catching up on Zechs' other side. 'Will it work?'

'It will work,' Relena promised. 'Now. I want to see them both.'

Zechs gestured for his escort, waiting for them just inside the lobby. 'I want the two Gundam Pilots brought to a conference room. When the Special Prosecutor and the Minister-President arrive, show them in.'

It took time. Relena spent most of it pacing anxiously, until Troyes coaxed her into the chair at the head of their table. Zechs kept her there by pouring her a glass of water from the carafe provided. He kissed her knuckles, and she smiled tightly at him. Van den Broeck did not pace, though his tense stance and frequent checking of the clock spoke volumes.

Duo was brought in first. He slowed when he saw just who occupied the room, nudged along by his escort. 'Relena,' he said, half-questioning. 'What's going on?'

'It's a good question,' Van den Broeck muttered.

Relena stood, stretching out a hand. Duo took it, and she pulled him in for a quick embrace. She touched his hair. 'Oh,' she said. 'You look a fright. Didn't they give you a comb?'

'I can't be gorgeous all the time.' Duo did have a dull blush when he scraped his loose hair behind his ears, though. 'Relena, what are you doing here?'

'Zechs rang me yesterday. It terrifies me the kind of situations you get yourselves in. When I think you were almost deported...'

'What?' Duo turned to follow her eyeline. 'Heero.'

'Heero,' Relena echoed, her voice barely a breath. She stumbled just a moment on her chair, caught by Troyes' hand at her elbow. She walked like a woman in a dream, crossing the room to Yuy there at the door. Yuy looked no less dazed. She touched his chest, the zip of his blue jumpsuit. Yuy moved suddenly, grabbing both her slim arms in his fists, staring almost wildly down at her. Zechs looked away as she turned her face up and they kissed.

Duo was looking away, as well. His expression was dark and dead-eyed. He's guessed, Zechs thought. For a moment-- a moment he didn't like in himself-- he wondered if maybe it might have been better, after all, to let Duo do it his way. Duo might have lived with it better if it had been his
own choice.

At any rate, it was a moot point. Zechs cleared his throat loudly when he heard the approach of a familiar strident voice. Relena jumped back from Yuy guiltily. Yuy touched his mouth, but he moved when Van den Broeck drew him aside.

The Special Prosecutor blasted into the room so hard the door went thumping back against the wall. 'What is the meaning of this?' she barked at Zechs. 'Either your investigation is concluded and you turn these men over to me, or you have information to disclose about their undeniable criminal activity.'

'Neither,' Zechs returned coolly. 'Please be seated. We have something to discuss, but we will wait for the Minister-President.'

'I am here.' A white-haired man in a very expensive suit entered on the heels of the Special Prosecutor, brushing her aside like so much white noise as she tried to interrupt him. 'Princess Relena,' he said directly, taking her hand and bowing briefly over it. 'The pleasure is mine. I received your communication.'

'And I have the official documents for your perusal, as I promised.' Troyes opened a briefcase on the table behind her, and passed her a thick folded packet wrapped in formal blue ribbon. Relena in turn offered it forward. 'Minister-President Moreau, the Kingdom of Sanq has learned of your intent to expel Heero Yuy from Brussels. We offer right of asylum.'

'What?' the Special Prosecutor exploded. 'Ceci est indigne! This is Preventers playing politics!' Relena never so much as looked at the woman. 'As we discussed, Mr Moreau,' she said, 'I am fully aware of my responsibility to continue the terms of Mr Yuy's sentence under the High Court. You have my assurance.'

'None is needed. Your honour is known the world over.' Moreau slapped the paper packet against his open palm. 'I cannot say I am entirely displeased with this solution, but I think you will find he brings a certain amount of trouble with him, your Highness.'

'The Gundam Pilots personally saved my kingdom, sir. I owe them greater debts than these.' Relena clasped Moreau's hand. 'And now I owe you one as well. You know where to find me when I can repay you.'

'Not both of us?' Yuy said suddenly. Relena's head dipped. Zechs answered for her. 'Just you.'

'Then I can't go.' Yuy set his jaw, but his voice didn't quite last him. 'I... won't.'

'Heero.' Zechs called his attention, but Yuy barely managed to look at him, his eyes locked on Relena. 'This is the only chance you'll have. Without asylum in Sanq, you will be deported to the colonies.'

'I won't leave him here alone. You know what will happen to him.'

'Duo, reason with him.'

Duo seemed to be caught off his guard. He licked his lips, but his hands were unsettled, hesitating between the back of the chair he stood at, twisting over themselves. 'Heero,' he began, but didn't seem to know what else to say.
'No matter what you do he will be here without you.' Zechs put himself physically between them, drawing Heero's eyes up to him. 'But he isn't alone. I'll be here.'

'Heero,' Relena said softly.

He'd once told Duo he admired Heero Yuy, and that had been true. Purpose and strength were always admirable qualities. He'd seen this struggle before, this need to find the right thing in a sea of bad choices. But now more than ever he also saw a young man who wanted to be sure and would never be sure enough.

'Duo,' Zechs said then. 'May I speak to you. Outside. Your Highness, Minister-President, please excuse me momentarily.'

'Of course,' Moreau said.

'I don't--' Duo began.

'Now,' Zechs cut him off. He caught Duo by the shoulder and propelled him out the door, throwing the flimsy wood shut behind them. Their momentum carried them a few yards down the corridor, past their escorts, who took in Zechs' glare and took care to mind their own business out of ear shot. Duo wrenched away from him, and Zechs let him go, staring at the stubbornly hunched shoulders and wondering if it would be better to shake Duo until his teeth rattled or just yell until he himself felt better.

'Cat got your tongue?' he said finally.

Duo hunched in even further on himself. 'Sarcasm is so not helpful right now.'

'Duo—' Zechs rubbed his neck with both hands, then clenched them behind his back. 'I am frankly at the end of my rope. I don't know what you want from me. You called me for help. Here I am, helping. Did I fail some kind of test? Did I miss a step on your checklist?'

'What the hell kind of solution is asylum?' Duo whirled on him then, though after his initial shout he controlled himself to a tight whisper. 'He'll be confined in Sanq the same way he is here. He'll still be gone!'

'He may be confined there, but I think he'll be far happier with Relena than he has been here, and from what I saw in there--'

'Huh,' Duo dismissed him contemptuously.

'From what I saw in there, I think they'll both be happier with him in Sanq.' He tried to lift Duo by the chin, but Duo slapped his hand away. 'Or is that where this is coming from? Are you jealous? I thought you wanted him to be happy.'

'They're a disaster together! They've already been five rounds on this. Maybe they're whatever right now, with the urgency and I don't know, but—'

'But that's a decision that should be left to them, I'm sure you agree. And Relena would hardly cast him to the wolves if they don't manage a romance.' Zechs blocked Duo against the wall with his arm and body, and, oh, Duo did not like that. The heat off his body rose, and that was nothing compared to the blaze in his eyes, but Zechs didn't back down. 'This is unworthy of you,' he told Duo quietly. 'I know you're scared. But this is his best chance, and he's looking to you to give him permission to go. A minute ago you were willing to go in his place, but if it comes to him walking away from you, you can't bear it'
'I never said that!'

'Then go back in there and say it's all right.'

'Of course it's all right.' Duo faced the wall, pressing his forehead into his elbow. 'He knows it's all right. My say-so doesn't matter at all.'

'Of course it matters.' He squeezed Duo's shoulders. 'You told me before. He'll do whatever you tell him to do. Go tell him to do what's best for him.'

He mostly expected it when Duo shoved him away. He made no attempt to stop it, or to stop Duo from stalking off. Duo was going in the right direction.

It didn't take long. Moreau was the first to leave, meeting up with his entourage and heading out without much discussion. The Special Prosecutor was next, wearing a thunderous scowl. When she saw Zechs, her mouth twisted even more. She flicked her hand at him in a gesture that fully expressed her opinion of him, and then she was stomping off, her heels practically casting sparks with the force of her steps.

Next was Van den Broeck. He hurried toward Zechs, grabbing his hand and pumping it. 'You are a genius!' he enthused. 'A masterstroke. Right of asylum! You should be a diplomat, Mr Merquise. And the Princess, every bit the miracle you called her. Genius, Mr Merquise.'

'I thought I told you call me Zechs.'

'And please, I am Pieter. Those who unite in the same cause must be friends, surely.' Van den Broeck gave him a broad white grin. 'You did a great thing for those young men. They could have no better champion.'

'Then Duo--'

'The Minister-President told her outright to dismiss any charges. Duo is free to go.'

That was more than Zechs could have believed possible. 'I think I owe Relena something very expensive for her birthday,' he managed. 'Moreau never would have done that if it weren't for Relena.'

'Yes, we had a hefty share of luck today.' Van den Broeck-- Pieter-- heaved a deep breath. 'But I will let you enjoy your victory alone with them. Go.'

Relena and Heero stood together. Her head inclined to his chest, and his lips touched her hair. Zechs fetched up against the door jamb to watch them. Add another to his list of cosmic forces; Zechs had seen love before in his life, but this kind of love was something remarkable. They all but radiated rightness.

It was Troyes Lefèvre who gently broke the reverie. The snap of the locks on the briefcase brought Relena's head up. 'We should go, my lady,' he murmured. 'We only have a few hours to get Mr Yuy back to Sanq.'

'Yes, you're right.' Relena rested her fingers on Heero's cheek. 'We shouldn't test Moreau's indulgence. He did this mostly as a favour to Sanq. My plane is waiting at the airport.'

'Duo.' Heero stirred. Zechs followed his gaze to the corner. If Heero and his sister were the epitome of lovers reunited, Duo was a prime example of someone abandoned and alone. Zechs looked down at his shoes, already knowing what was coming. Duo wouldn't walk out of this all
right. Which meant their relationship was as good as over, even with both of them still in the same city, alone together.

Duo had a reasonably bright smile when Zechs dared to look again. The smile was a little too braced, but it obviously relieved Heero. 'You two crazy kids be good,' Duo said. 'I'm not there to play referee when you fight. Troyes has my permission to lock you in your rooms if you raise your voices at each other.'

'I shall take this advice most seriously.' Troyes produced a small duffel. 'Clothes for Mr Yuy. You will be more comfortable on the flight, yes?'

'Yes.' Heero kissed Relena again, more tenderly than Zechs would have thought he was capable of. 'We'll be just a moment.'

Zechs held the door as Troyes and Duo exited. Duo kicked at the wall. Zechs hurriedly shut the door, but Duo's temper fizzled almost as soon as it appeared. Duo rubbed his nose, his neck, and then with a tiny exhale, he surrendered.

'Okay,' he said. That was all.

'That was well done,' Troyes said. The curve of his lips was sympathetic, but not a whit of it reached his voice. 'Relena was very right about you, Mr Maxwell. You are a man of great integrity.'

Duo flushed. 'Not always,' he muttered.

'Nonsense.' Troyes took a card from his briefcase and extended it. 'I hope this time you will take my number? If ever you are in trouble again, I hope you will call. Though I am not Relena, I have resources. It would be a privilege to me to help.'

Duo took the card reluctantly. 'I was really rude to you last time. Sorry about that.'

'I think I deserved it.' Troyes kissed both of Duo's cheeks, and Duo's blush reignedited. 'But now I have a good example to live up to.'

Zechs moved aside for the door opening again. His sister was first; she wore a demure look, but there was a steely determination in the way she looked over her shoulder at Heero that said promises had been exchanged. Heero had a kind of vast contentment, a wonder that softened him, and he held Relena's hand tightly. That lasted until he looked at Duo, and then it fractured.

Duo coughed. 'If you get stuck in Brussels because you're slow Zechs'll get really pissed. He's, like, totally tired of cleaning up after you.'

'Yeah.' Heero still hesitated. Finally he turned to Zechs. 'Watch him,' he said. 'Even if he makes it hard. He does that.'

Duo rolled his eyes. 'I'm not even going to miss you.'

'That's okay.' Heero made it as awkward as possible, but Duo's eyes still closed involuntarily when Heero gave him a one-armed hug. Duo carefully didn't touch him back, and Heero was off him quickly. 'Stay low.'

'Same. And quick fucking around on the internet. You know better.'

That seemed to land. 'Yes,' Heero said quietly. 'Thank you.' He included Zechs in that, with a
formal nod. Zechs returned it.

'Go, already,' Duo said.
'Huh,' Spider said. 'That was a good call.'

'Thanks.' Zechs hunched his shoulders under his coat, wishing his breath was still steaming-- then at least he would have been warm somewhere on the inside. His hands were blocks of ice. 'You're sure Orange secured her plane?'

'I'll try not to take that personally on my partner's behalf.' Spider grinned at him around a crumbling cigarette. 'The Princess is in good hands. And her Prince.'

God. Heero Yuy would be his brother-in-law. That was worth a wince.

'All right, I'm on my way.' Spider crushed his cigarette against the bricks of the Asylum Centre, and tossed the filter to a street-side garbage bin. 'Glad you were right about the Gundam Pilots. Would have been a shame to see you fall flat on your face, especially with Tropic aiming for your job.'

'What?' Zechs had been turning to go in, but that pulled him back. 'What are you talking about?'

'Not to speak ill of anyone in the company, but it's an open secret.' Spider's already beady eyes narrowed further as he squinted up the steps at Zechs. 'Everyone knows the Director is looking at you for promotion. Tropic wants Deputy.'

'An open secret.' Zechs tried to close his fists in his pockets, but his fingers wouldn't obey. 'I didn't know that.'

Spider screwed his mouth to side. 'Maybe time to start paying attention, yeah? Not for nothing, but I'd rather ignore your official directives than his.' He tilted his chin in farewell, and struck a laconic pace down the steps toward the limo waiting below. He climbed in the front passenger, and the engine gunned. The vehicle rolled out into traffic. Zechs watched it until it turned at the light and disappeared. He twitched the collar of his coat, and went inside.

Duo's release paperwork took two hours. Zechs suspected the Special Prosecutor of dragging it out in revenge for losing both her victims, but Van den Broeck nodded at each new form as if he'd expected it and found it safe enough, so Zechs kept his mouth shut and let her throw document after document at them. Duo endured it silently, too, mechanically signing where he was told again, again, again.

But at last they reached the end of the file. The Special Prosecutor gave him a final frosty stare, and swept out. Zechs heaved a deep breath. Van den Broeck scraped their copies into a folder. 'I will file these for you,' he told Duo, dropping a hand to Duo's shoulder. 'The nightmare is over now.'

'Thanks for your help.' Duo flexed his fingers, folded them in his lap. 'That's twice now me and Heero owe you.'

'I would not have it any other way.' Van den Broeck's smile encompassed Zechs, as well. 'Go home. Rest. Put this behind you. And ring me when you want to get a drink some night.'

Zechs answered when Duo's head bowed. 'We will. Thank you. You can get back all right?'

'I intend to walk no further than a taxi.' Van den Broeck gripped his hand. 'You're a handy man in a tight spot, my friend. Well done.'
'Be well.' Zechs watched him go, and pulled out the chair corner to Duo. He sat heavily. 'Well,' he observed mutedly. 'You need a drink?'

'A couple thousand drinks,' was the dull answer.

'Settle for some water.' He used Relena's untouched glass, refreshing it with cold water from the sweating carafe. Duo sipped once, but it went back to the table almost untouched. Zechs drank it for him, pressing the cool glass to his forehead.

'I'll drive you home,' he said. 'They should have your clothes ready for property release. Change and I'll walk you out.'

'I can take the metro.'

'Kindly wait to be stubborn, please.' He didn't quite move to touch Duo; Duo didn't quite shy back from him. Zechs transferred his eyes to the wall. 'It won't feel so dire once you're out of here.'

'No-one ever told you the fire's waiting outside the fry pan?' Duo shoved to his feet. 'Let's go. I just want to be done with this shit.'

When Duo emerged from the toilets in his own clothes again, Zechs couldn't help a little glow of relief, even knowing Duo was probably right. The worst was over, but there would be plenty more to come, and it wouldn't be any less raw for having survived this far. And he marked, too, that Duo was suspiciously restrained. That would explode, eventually, and he didn't kid himself who would be the target when it did. If he was lucky, he'd be able to nap first, but he didn't count on it. Duo would need him.

The walk through the garage to the car was silent. The drive across town was silent, too. There was no street parking open by Duo's apartment, and he ended out using the alley behind the block. Duo was out of the car as soon as he engaged the brake. Zechs followed him slowly, but caught him up on the landing in front of his door. There was a paper notice pasted to the jamb-- resident removed from premises on suspicion of criminal violation. Anyone and everyone walking past would have read that. Zechs reached over Duo's shoulder and shredded the notice with his key. It ripped down when he pulled at the halves, leaving spots of glue behind. 'Ignore it,' he said.

The Asylum Centre crew hadn't completely trashed the apartment; when he'd seen that notice, he'd feared it. The cabinets all hung open and Duo's file of bills and other papers had been left spread over the countertop. The cushions on the couch had been removed, the seams opened. Holes had been sawn through the drywall beside all the registers and junctions. 'It's standard procedure,' he murmured. 'Searching for contraband. They could have done worse.'

'My landlord is probably flipping his shit.' Duo scraped the toe of his shoe through drywall shavings left scattered on the floorboards. 'Heero's place, too.'

Zechs hadn't thought of that. 'You could leave it for the government. They'll deal with all of it, when they repossess it.'

'Someone should get his stuff for him. Can you get in there?'

Probably. And those damn computers. Zechs found a blank envelope on the coffee table and a pen, and began writing a list. They would need plaster, paint. Cleaning solvents. Boxes. With Yuy officially in Sanq's custody, Zechs didn't think it likely that Sally would let him ship Yuy's possessions on Preventer's dime, but Relena would surely reimburse him any expenses. Duo wouldn't have any such luck.
Duo interrupted his thoughts by emerging from the bedroom carrying a bundle of sheets. 'They tossed the beds too,' he said, dropping the wadded ball by the door. 'And pulled down part of the drop-ceiling. What the hell were they looking for?'

'Did they find your gun?' Zechs asked him pointedly.

Duo's mouth went thin. 'I'm not an idiot,' he said. 'I didn't leave it laying around in plain sight.'

'They'll have found Heero's. All of them. He didn't have the warning you did.'

Duo bit down on his lips until the skin around them whitened. 'Yeah,' he said finally. 'Probably.'

Zechs opened the refrigerator, and mentally added 'food' to his list as he poked wilted lettuce and checked the expiry date on the milk bag. A nap didn't look to be in his queue any time soon. 'Do you have spare trash bags?' he said. 'I'll get the broom. We should get started.'

'You don't have to stay.' Duo fingered a hole at head-height. 'You've got stuff to do. Or get back to L4.'

Zechs dropped his elbows to the countertop, slowly turning over the pen in his hands. 'He'll be better off in Sanq, Duo.'

Duo turned tense and straight-shouldered. 'You already yelled at me about this.'

'I don't believe I did yell. But maybe you should. Get it out. He'll be better off there. You're still stuck here. He left you behind.'

'What are you doing?'

'I know you think if you just pretend long enough you can make it all right. That's not realistic.'

It was painful to look at Duo's face. Maybe too early; maybe he was pushing too hard and too soon. But Duo was strong enough. And Duo listened, which was more than Zechs could say about himself at that age. Lucy had hammered at him for years before he'd even begun to acknowledge her point. Then again, Duo didn't have the choices he'd had. He couldn't just disappear to the Red Planet for a few years while he found himself.

Or maybe not. 'Why didn't you ever run away?' he asked suddenly. 'All this time here. Don't tell me you couldn't have disappeared if you wanted to. You vanished out of OZ prisons a half-dozen times.'

'Not quite that many,' Duo said, with just a ghost of a smile that faded almost before he'd seen it. He hooked his fingers through the hole and dropped his forehead to the wall beside it. 'If you run away you have to have a place to go to.'

'The colonies. Your friends there. You would have been safe from extradition.'

'Heero was here.'

'I don't mean when he was ill. I mean after you were released. Pieter would have helped you escape. You wouldn't even have needed his help. You're not watched. All you ever had to do was walk to a bus depot and board.'

'I don't know what you want from me.' Duo turned his back, a transparent ploy. He grabbed a double handful of broken drywall from the floor and walked it to the bin in the corner. 'You know
what our situation was.'

'Our.'

'What?'

'I think you've lived through Heero for too long. I don't know if you even knew you were doing it.'

'Oh, come on.' Duo threw a square, and it skidded across the floor with a cloud of crumbles before fetching up on the carpet. 'You don't have a fucking clue, man. This kind of pop-psychology crap-- what are you, a talk-show? Don't be stupid.'

Closer to that hot temper Duo was always claiming he had. There was heat behind that. 'So tell me how it really was. Tell me why someone who's all about moving on stayed in a city for someone who was never going to be able to. Not for you, anyway. Relena--'

'Stop.' Duo said it so quietly that Zechs almost didn't hear it. Not angry. Not hurt. Not anything but a simple word. Zechs licked his lips, and closed them.

'Go take a shower,' he told Duo finally. 'I'll start cleaning up.'

'No. No.' Duo rubbed his dusty hands on his shirt, leaving a white streak behind. He pulled his peacoat down from the hook it had barely had time to rest on, and yanked it on both arms at once. 'I'm going out. Stay or not, I don't care.'

'You expect me to let you walk out the door?'

'I don't expect it-- I'm telling you.' Duo made a fist in his hair and snapped on an elastic. 'Start by getting out of my way.'

He moved, all right, straight in front of the door. 'At least tell me where you plan on going. And where you hid your gun.'

Duo's eyes narrowed dangerously. Zechs almost took it back; it wasn't-- entirely-- a fair thing to have said. Instead, he held his ground, figuratively as well as literally. He spread his feet to carry his weight evenly, and he waited with his arms crossed.

Duo stepped back. To the bedroom. Zechs swayed, thinking he should follow to see what Duo was doing, but Duo was back in moments. Holding the vintage LED alarm clock from his bedside table. He tossed it at Zechs.

Zechs turned it over in his hands, wary of being tested and sure he was failing. 'And?' he said finally.

'I've got a phone that can do my laundry for me, and you never even questioned why I kept a broken old antique around?'

Broken. Yes. He'd noticed it Christmas Eve-- the display didn't work. And even for an antique, the clock was heavy. Suspicion didn't even touch it. He knew. He pried at the plastic slit in the cover, and it popped easily. The clock had no guts. It did have a Glock 22. Loaded.

'I'm not going to shoot anyone,' Duo said. 'Now move, or I make you move.'

On its face that statement was so preposterous that Zechs scoffed without thinking. A moment later, he got a sharp elbow in his solar plexus, followed by a fist with pointed knuckles jabbing his
stomach. Zechs grabbed for the wall as he collapsed inward. Duo ducked under his arm, wrenched the door open, and was gone before Zechs could even catch his breath.

'Damn it,' Zechs wheezed. He caught the door on its backswing, and then his own temper finally broke. He threw it closed so hard it bounced, and he kicked it on the rebound. 'Damn it, Duo!'

**

His own tantrum was short-lived. He was simply too tired to sustain it. He made a desultory attempt at cleaning, but stopped after filling a bag with the broken drywall. He sat on Duo's couch, intending to use the quiet to make some necessary calls, but the soft cushions and the silence in the apartment conquered him quickly.

He woke with a head that felt stuffed and heavy. He rubbed sand from his eyes and wearily popped both knees and both elbows before he felt like he might possibly be able to stand upright. He popped his spine, too, working out the crunchy feeling in his shoulders and neck, wondering when he'd started to get old enough that he could feel like an arthritic old man after a short nap. Maybe not so short. The apartment was still closed and he knew by feel that he was alone, but the daylight out the window was gone, replaced with the blue glow of street lamps. He found his mobile on the kitchen counter and tapped it on. Weather foggy and frozen, time well past eight. He'd slept away the entire afternoon. And wherever Duo had gone, he hadn't come back from there yet.

He washed his face in the bath, and filled the kettle to make himself tea. He was still tired enough that he thought of adding Duo's favoured splash of whiskey, but decided against it-- it would only put him back to sleep. He found a bowl of leftover chestnut risotto in the freezer and heated it in the microwave, and finished off the vanilla-poached apricots as well. The carbohydrates did their job; he felt rather more functional with a full belly.

He had forgotten to charge his phone before his sleep, and had to hunt down a cord to use it. He had several messages-- though none from Duo's number, he noted crossly. That hurt perhaps a bit more than it ought to have. Zechs scrolled to the message from Spider's phone and played that first.

'Safe back to Sanq,' his fellow agent reported briskly. 'I'll get the children back to their playpens, no fear. Orange is on Yuy, I'm on the Princess, but at this rate I think there's only one door to guard, so to speak. Maybe Orange can stand under the window in the rose bushes. Do you know, I think we'll be hearing the pitter-pat of little feet soon. Ha-det!'

Zechs could only hope Spider had made that joke in privacy. Relena was still a young woman in the public eye, and rumours would fly without her Preventers guardsmen adding to them. Spider--probably-- knew better. If he didn't, though, Orange would take care of it. Forcefully. But it was good news they'd made it to Sanq without incident.

He had an earlier message from Neptune's number, and braced himself for that one. He pressed the 'play' button and set the phone on speaker, laying it carefully on the countertop. Her smooth alto voice began immediately.

'Good news and bad news,' she said. 'Brace yourself. We got all but two of the first rescue crew out. They hadn't been able to find anyone before the second blast, but they had gotten calls for help from Junction 6 before the wi-fi went down. We had to clear some rubble to get to 6, but-- good news-- we found seven of the missing miners in the safety curtain there, all alive.'
Seven. Zechs let out an explosive breath he hadn't even realised he'd been holding. That was a miracle-- those men should have run out of air long before rescue was even a possibility.

'They'd made it to the curtain and the extra tanks. After the second blast, though, when it was clear we weren't going to get to them in time, they decided to send someone out to see if they could get to one of the stores of tanks at another junction. And this is where we get to the bad news. Quatre Winner was with them, and he volunteered. He went with another of the miners. They brought back eight tanks, but that still wasn't enough. When they realised they were going to run out, Winner and the other miner went back out to find more tanks. They never came back.'

Damn. There was far too much inevitability in that simple sentence. Of course Quatre Winner would volunteer. And there could have been any number of hazards that would crush, trap, or drain a man of his remaining oxygen during a fruitless search.

'We're still looking,' Neptune continued, but her expressionless voice told him she wasn't holding out hope. 'There is an interesting angle on this, though. Mavise Winner was with the crewmen. She claims she went into the mine to find her brother and warn him. Had a change of heart when she realised the bombs would kill so many people, but her FreeSpace buddies wouldn't let her go until it was too late. Apparently she did get to Winner before the first explosion in time to convince him to get his crew to a safety curtain. Honestly, I don't know how they left her alive without Winner there to stop them from ripping her to pieces.' There was a pause, in which Zechs listened to Neptune's soft breaths; then she said, her voice quieter now, robbed of its usual professionalism, 'It's kind of amazing. Even after what she did, or what she was a part of. All seven men agreed to give up a tank of oxygen to keep her alive. And when we broke through the rubble they sent her out first. All the-- you know, all the horrible things we see sometimes in this job, all the awful things we know people are capable of-- I never thought I'd see something like that. They all protected her.'

Zechs gazed down at the fork drooping between his fingers, silently agreeing with her. He couldn't begin to imagine how hard that group decision had been. And Winner must have known they might let his sister die if he weren't there to stop them. Had he gone for the extra tanks as a bribe to win their cooperation? Or had he just trusted them, believed in them? Sometimes humanity could be more shocking than inhumanity. And wasn't that a sad statement.

'All right,' Neptune said finally. 'I'll keep you up on any progress from here. No-one's giving up on Winner. And they're trying to extract the dead now. We'll still be at this for a while. And tracking down these FreeSpace murderers. Mavise is talking. We should be able to get a dozen of them on what she's confessing. So. Hope your end on Earth is sprouting some good news, too. Talk to you soon.'

Zechs sent that message to his 'save' cabinet. There were no others from her, for better or worse. If they hadn't found Winner and that other crewman yet, they'd still be searching. But if they had found him, if he was dead, they could be under communications lock while they informed the family. A quick search of the news revealed nothing specific, no headlines announcing tragedy. Zechs wasn't quite prepared to assume that no news was good, but he hoped.

It was edging past nine. And still no Duo. Nor could Zechs say with certainty where he would have gone. Yuy's apartment? Maybe. To Van den Broeck? That seemed less likely-- while Van den Broeck would probably welcome him, he didn't see it in Duo to be that openly in need. Duo was two parts independence and three parts determination that the world see him as independent. And whether or not it was true, Duo wanted it to be true-- and having Zechs shove his face in the fact that he'd obviously been torn in two with Yuy's deportation had probably not even approached the edge of helpful. Zechs scrubbed at his tired eyes. He should have known to let Duo accept things in
his own time. He should at least have waited until they'd both had a few hours of rest under their belts. But he'd seen an explosion coming and he'd reacted the way he always did to a battle in the offing: he'd attacked first. If he'd given Duo time, given Duo space-- just given Duo simple support, he had to admit that Duo would probably have handled it just fine.

He pulled on his coat, used Duo's spare key to lock the door behind him, and left to get the car.

He did check Yuy's apartment, first stop, but the red flyer announcing Yuy's criminal violations was undisturbed, still securely attached to both door and jamb. It took an hour to make that a round trip back to Duo's apartment, stopping along the way at the market Duo shopped at-- closed-- and the laundry where Duo went for the wash-- open, but empty of all patrons-- and the three small bars in the blocks nearest Duo's apartment, none of which had seen him in weeks. He was pulling back into the alley in defeat when it finally occurred to him that he knew exactly where Duo would go in this kind of mood. He turned right back into traffic and headed for the park.

He left the sedan in a small lot by the ice skating rink. It had started to snow, and his coat was thin defence against the damp cold. He warmed both hands in his armpits as he set off on the lane he'd walked with Duo and Yuy just days ago, crunching frozen grass beneath his heels as he left the bright lights behind for the small solar lamps that gave off only a fading haze to light his way.

It didn't take as long as he'd thought it would. Either Duo hadn't gone far, or he'd been on his way back. He found Duo standing on wooden bridge over Lover's Lake. Telling himself it wasn't jinxing the name, he mounted the bridge, and walked exactly nineteen steps to Duo's side.

'You should've worn a hat,' Duo said.

'I didn't think of it.' After a moment of hesitation, he mimicked Duo's slouch on the rail, settling his elbows on cold wood, rubbing his hands slowly to keep them from chapping. 'Have you been out here all night?'

'I think better when I'm suffering.' Duo let out a little puff of air. He pulled off his cap and held it out. 'Your hair is steaming. Put it on.'

Zechs felt his face heat. He confined himself to a nod of thanks, and pulled it on. It had Duo's warmth, and it smelled like him. The press of his wet hair to his scalp made him shiver, but it did help. 'Did it help? Being out here.'

'I guess.'

Duo didn't seem upset any more, at least. Or at least not so furious with him. There was a heavy blankness to his face, a stillness to the set of his body. Zechs didn't look at him for long. He transferred his gaze to the lake below them. It wasn't entirely ice, but snow was starting to settle on the surface. It had been a long winter.

'What was it like on Mars?' Duo asked him abruptly.

'Mars?' He had to slip his hands into his pockets; they were starting to burn with the chill. He wasn't sure where he'd left his gloves-- probably back in his apartment, or in the office, perhaps. 'Mars,' he repeated slowly, unsure what Duo wanted him to say. He settled on honesty. 'Dusty,' he said. 'Not quite like a desert. The dust gets everywhere, specially during the storms. We used to spend weeks after storms cleaning out vents with toothbrushes.' Duo's cheeks sucked in, like a smile but without the right emotion behind it. Zechs watched him sideways, wishing he knew what was going on behind that mask. 'The bio-domes in the colony keep the temperature even, but outside of them it's cold. Like this, a bit, except in the summer season. It's nice then. In the winter
season it's-- you feel how far away you are from everything. Everyone. At first I welcomed that. I thought it was... safest. For everyone else, for me to be so isolated.'

'But you left. Eventually.'

'I suppose in the end I was lonely.' He could close his eyes and summon up his last solid memory of Mars. His last rover mission. He'd separated from the group to pick up a broken sample drone; had crested a crater's ridge and looked out over that vast red surface, pockmarked and streaked with millions of years of humanless history and-- 'It made me come to terms with my smallness,' he said finally. 'The planet didn't need me, want me, care about my existence. It made me feel less a monstrosity than a-- a-- confused and unhappy man who'd made a terrible mistake.'

'I think I could use a moment like that.' He listened to Duo's slow, careful inhale. 'It might be a bit much to ask of a municipal park.'

'Might be.' He risked it, then, because the moment had a kind of tentative possibility to it. He put his arm over Duo's shoulders. Then he changed his mind. He stepped behind Duo and wrapped him in both arms, tucking Duo's head under his chin. Duo's chilly fingers lifted, to curve very lightly over his wrist. Zechs said nothing else. It was good to know he'd chosen rightly, but he didn't need to press it any further. Duo had to come to him, now.

And, miracle of miracles, Duo did. Turned in his arms, tugging at Zechs' collar. Zechs bent, and Duo rested his forehead against his. 'I'm sorry,' Duo whispered.

'It's all right.' He kissed Duo, and smoothed his damp hair down. 'A little yelling is understandable. Let's just leave out the hitting in the future.'

'Maybe.' Duo exhaled a tremulous laugh into his collarbone. 'Okay. I swear.'

'Who taught you to hit like that, anyway?' He guided Duo's cold hand to his chest. 'I can still feel it.'

'A priest.' Duo grinned up at his scepticism. 'I was always getting into fights at school. Father Maxwell said if I was going to misbehave, I might as well learn how to do it without losing all the time.' His grin faded, then. His palm smoothed gently over Zechs' bruised chest. 'He never asked me stay for him.'

Zechs knew they weren't speaking of a priest anymore. 'He needed you,' he answered. 'You know that.'

'I needed him. To matter. I needed to matter to someone.'

'There are other ways to matter.' He gripped Duo's biceps, giving him a tiny shake. 'Let me help you find them?'

He didn't imagine that Duo had to force himself to nod. But he did. Zechs kissed him again, briefly and firmly. 'Good,' he said. 'Now can we please get out of this blizzard?'

'Wimp,' Duo retorted, though his voice was hoarse. 'Yeah. I'm with you.'

**
He made another choice that turned out to be right-- he drove them back to his own apartment. Duo relaxed considerably when he realised where they were headed. He even put his hand over Zechs' on the shift.

'Cook you dinner,' he said.

'Only if you feel like it.' Zechs parked in his usual spot. 'Duo... you know you left your phone at your apartment.'

'What?' Duo touched his coat pockets, before his hand dropped slowly to his lap. 'You checked my messages.'

'I can try to help you get your job back.'

'No.' Duo stared blindly out the windscreen as the wipers swept snow back and forth. 'She was right to sack me. I caused her a lot of trouble, doing this. Busy season. I put my own shit first. Can't do that and be employable.'

'You didn't put your own shit first.' He squeezed Duo's hand and kissed his knuckles. 'You put your friend first. What kind of man would you be if you'd chosen the garage instead?'

'Doesn't mean I didn't break the rules.' Duo blew out a long breath from pursed lips. 'Good news is I'll have plenty of daylight hours to pack up my apartment. Find a new place to live. Cheaper place.'

'Move in with me.'

Duo's head snapped around. 'What?'

The thought had been growing in the back of his mind. Until he'd spoken the words he'd been doubting the wisdom of such a proposition, but now that he was to it, all he felt was calm. 'Move in with me. You should move in.'

'What—' For maybe the first time since they'd met, Duo was genuinely speechless. 'What—happens, uh, if-- I mean, Lord, what if we break up?'

Zechs shrugged one-shouldered. 'Then you move into the exercise room and pay rent. I'm away enough with Preventers that it wouldn't bother you. We can worry about that if it ever happens.'

Duo bit his lips. 'Jesus,' he whispered. 'I... He cleared his throat, his eyelashes dipping low. 'If this is just you trying to get laid...'

Zechs didn't dignify that weak attempt at humour. He kissed Duo's forehead. 'Come inside.'

The walk up to his apartment was silent. Rather, they didn't speak, but though they held hands as they climbed in the lift, he was aware that Duo's attention had gone inward-focused. Whatever he was thinking, he was thinking hard. Zechs had to say his name when the lift arrived on his floor. Duo only gave him an absent 'Uh-huh' and followed where he was tugged. Zechs unlocked his door with distinct relief. 'Welcome home,' he said.

'Uh-huh,' Duo repeated. 'Oh. Give me your coat. I'll hang it up.'

Zechs raised an eyebrow. 'All right.' He surrendered his jacket and scarf. Duo shook it out briskly and hung it in his little foyer closet, and hung his own as well. 'Are you tired?' he asked Duo. 'You could have a bath. Maybe a glass of wine?'
'Okay. Yeah.' Duo leaned back on the closet door. 'You have any of that stuff I left here last time? The food?'

'Most of it. I froze it the way you told me to.'

'Good.' Duo passed him by for the kitchen. 'Why don't you get the wine. I'll cook something.'

Zechs detoured to his hutch. 'Is red all right? I don't have any white.'

'It's fine.' Duo was removing an assortment of containers from Zechs' freezer. 'Are those smoked oysters here? I think I can put something together out of this.'

'Cupboard, right where you left them.' Zechs set a bottle of pinot noir on the counter, out of Duo's way, and rested his elbows beside it. 'You'll fit right in here. You already made a mark.'

Duo's eyes were low, on the tupperware he turned over in his hands. 'I think I love you,' he said.

Zechs rubbed his mouth. 'Duo.'

'Don't say it back, or think that you have to.' Duo flattened his hands on the granite, and met his eyes squarely. 'Most of the time I think we're good at this. We work together, we fit well enough. But then sometimes you have these moments. You say something and it's-- it's so right, like you see past all the extraneous crap and you just know the perfect way to-- say the right thing. And I think I love that. Pretty sure. I'm pretty sure I do.' He reached for the bottle, and placed it between Zechs' fists. 'So. Go open that and pour a couple of glasses, okay?'

'We could talk about it,' Zechs began to say.

'But we don't need to.' Duo's mouth moved, curled up at the corners. 'Just FYI. Been a long couple days for us both. We'll figure it all out when it's time.'

It made for a quiet meal. It made for a lot to think about. He sat sipping his wine and watching Duo move about the kitchen, realising that Duo was right-- they did seem to be good at this part. It was comfortable, this small and normal activity together. It was something he could imagine continuing well into the future-- and imagining the future was not something he'd ever been much capable of. Maybe Duo wanted a Mars moment, but Zechs thought he might be experiencing another for himself. A future. He'd lost all future in the seconds his parents had died. OZ, White Fang-- all of that had been vengeance, not living. He'd been adrift on Mars because he'd been bereft of purpose, and he'd had to learn from scratch how to rebuild, rediscover that. But Duo was so good at that already. Had found identity and purpose in things people like them had rarely been able to try. Zechs could learn from that. And he wanted to. He watched Duo move from the stove to the cutting board, the smooth practised movements of the knife in his capable hands, the way he used a knuckle to loop an errant string of hair behind his ear, twirled his fork between his fingers as he ate. The way he breathed, deeply, evenly, willing it to be okay.

When their plates rested in the sink and the oven was propped open to cool, Zechs pushed their chairs back under the table and palmed the light switch. 'Shall we go to bed?' he asked gently.

'Yeah.' Duo surprised him one more time-- set his palm open and tender against Zechs' belly, smoothing upward over his chest. 'Come on, beautiful.'

He woke abruptly hours later with just the feeling that time had passed. He was a little lightheaded, and cold; the sheet had fallen to his naked waistline, and he was only warm where Duo's back curled to his side. He fumbled in the dark for the duvet, clawing it up where it dragged on the floor. He tucked it carefully around Duo's bare shoulders.
There-- the sound that had waked him. His mobile, beeping in receipt of a message. He sat up against the headboard and set it to his ear to play.

When he had listened to it three times through, he reached down. Duo stirred when Zechs ran his fingers through his hair, sifting it softly away from his forehead. 'Wake up,' he whispered.

Duo fumbled an arm under his head, blinking heavily. 'Huh,' he mumbled, eyes falling closed again. 'What is it.'

'Duo. They found him.'

'What?' Duo's head rolled back. Zechs smiled at his stare.

'They found Quatre,' he told him. 'He's alive. Just barely. He and another miner had gone looking for extra tanks. They weren't able to find any-- they were rationing their own oxygen by the end. But the rescuers found them. They're alive.'

Duo inhaled sharply. 'God. God, I can't believe that. Trowa must be-- rationing? He's not--'

'Too early to tell. Distorientated, of course, but too soon to tell more than that. And Trowa almost kicked his way through the crowd to get to him, yes.' Zechs felt his own smile widen at Duo's fleeting grin. 'It's over.'

'Zechs.' Duo tried to get more out, but his voice failed suddenly. Zechs carefully brushed away the thin line of moisture that clumped Duo's eyelashes.

'I love you too,' Zechs said. He brought Duo's fingers to his lips. 'I do.'
Fourteen

'Then we tr-- tr-- we--'

'Oxygen,' Barton said sharply, pressing the mask insistently to his lover's face. Quatre Winner fell back to his pillow with a weak gasp. Barton whispered to him, so low that the camera didn't pick it up.

'Was that something important?' Zechs asked. 'Did we get anyone to read his lips?'

'Mèo did,' Cobra assured him. 'He's a useful man to have around. The Director's got that "transfer" gleam in her eye. Anyway, it was just lovey-dovey stuff. Telling Winner he should shut up and sleep.'

Winner had apparently ignored the advice. After only a minute he pushed away the mask. 'We were trying to find more tanks. We found one of the-- one-- Trowa--'

'One of the bombs,' Barton finished for him. Barton's affect was flat, but Zechs recognised fury behind stony eyes. It was more than obvious he wanted Preventers to shut up, too. 'One that didn't explode.'

'Can you pinpoint the location of the ordnance?' That was Sally's voice, off-screen. 'If we supplied you a map.'

'The tunnel is-- is--' Winner's face screwed up with visceral frustration. Zechs felt great sympathy for that emotion. He'd seen men suffer from headwounds, concussions, the physical exertion of mobile suit piloting that brought human bodies to deadly extremes. Winner was frustrated now, but the long-term effects of oxygen deprivation might not be evident for years.

'Hey.' It was Duo, emerging from their bedroom rubbing his eyes on his forearm and burying a yawn in his elbow. 'You were gone when I woke up.'

'Back to work.' He tapped a quick message to Cobra, who paused playback for him and kept wisely mum with Duo near enough to overhear. 'There's juice and yoghurt,' Zechs added, twisting in his seat to face Duo. 'The kettle should still be warm.'

'Thanks.' Duo crossed his arms over his bare chest. 'You have anything I could wear? My clothes are still damp. Should've put them in the dryer last night.'

'Of course.' He rose from his desk and opened the laundry closet. A white undershirt and long-sleeved overshirt. 'Trousers might be more difficult,' he said. 'We can try.'

'I can sit around in my shorts.' Duo shrugged into Zechs' clothing, pushing the sleeves up his wrists when they fell long over his hands. 'It's not like I've got anywhere to be.'

Zechs kissed him. 'It won't seem so bad for long. We'll talk about options. I just need to finish this.'

'Oh.' Duo's eyes dipped behind him to the computer. 'Guess I'm dismissed.'

'I didn't mean it like that.'

'No, classified, or whatever. Yeah.' Duo pushed at the long sleeves again. 'I'll, um, use the shower.'

'Thank you.' Zechs kissed him again, to take the sting out of it. 'I won't be long.'
'That's almost the end of the video, anyway,' Cobra told him when he returned. 'Barton called it a halt. Winner gave us the location of the unexploded ordnance, and they're working on getting to it. If we could match the construction to the plans Mavise Winner has, we'll have these bastards cold.'

'What did Quatre Winner say about FreeSpace?'

'Only that he knew they had a grudge and that he'd known about his sister's involvement. He hadn't been expecting violence. No-one was; they were on a lot of radars, but no-one caught it coming.'

'So the question is what pushed them to act now?'

'We're still establishing that. Mavise doesn't seem sure about it, or she's just not telling. And she's got a lawyer now. The family lawyer.'

'The same one who was there turning her in?'

'They're cooperating, but he's angling for immunity. He might get it, if they keep her talking.'

'Can he convince Mavise to turn on FreeSpace? Do they know yet she's betrayed them?' Zechs tapped his fingers on his desk, nudging a broken rubber band across the oak planks. 'If Preventers can send her back to the fold, she could gather enough intelligence to shut the entire operation down.'

'You think big,' Cobra mused. 'I'll bring it to the Director. You volunteering to run the op?'

'We'll see if Sally takes the bait before I go around dropping names.' Zechs checked his watch. 'It's getting late for you. Go get some sleep. Thanks for filling me in, Cobra.'

'No problem.'

His bath was steaming when he entered. 'It's me,' he said, perhaps inanely. 'Just going to shave. Will it bother you?'

'It's your place.'

'Our place.'

The shower curtain inched back with a little shriek of hangers on the metal rod. Duo's head, hair slicked in a sudsy fall over his cheek, peeked out. 'You all done out there?' he asked.

'More or less.' He intercepted a drip of soapy water on its way to Duo's eye. 'How did you sleep?'

'Okay, I guess.' Duo pushed his hair back, then reached for Zechs' wrist. 'Find out how big your water tank is?'

'Are you sure?' he asked, though his mouth went dry just thinking about it. The touch of Duo's fingers on his skin was suddenly electric.

'Think we could both use it.' Duo let out a long, shaky breath. 'Think, uh, reaffirming, and, um, therapeutic stress relief. And you did a big thing for me and I don't think I handled it, um, as brilliantly as it deserved, so... how about I find a way to say thanks that maybe doesn't give me a chance to say so many wrong words?'

'Duo, if you were perfect, I'd be in trouble.' He leaned into the shower to kiss Duo, getting spattered by the shower nozzle in the process. He stepped back to pull off his shirt, and shucked his sweatpants as quickly as he could. He swallowed Duo's snigger by grabbing him up in both arms.
Duo had time for just a gasp before Zechs pressed their mouths together.

**

'I sort of pictured a bigger budget,' Duo observed.

'The budget goes to the artillery, not the offices.' Zechs palmed the wallswitch, and daylight flooded the floor as the blinds rose on auto. 'Though I hear the original carpet was vertigo-inducing.'

'I'm not entirely sure you've improved on it.' Duo shuddered as he forced his eyes up from the swirl pattern beneath his shoes. 'So where do you sit?'

'I'm on another floor. We can go by it if you really want to. But this is where the interview suites are.' He bent to hold his keycard to the receptor, and the inside locks released for him. 'Through here. You want a tea before we start?'

'Yeah, I guess. Maybe.' Duo was slow in following, and Zechs had to tap the receptor again to keep the door open long enough for him. 'We really have to record this? You can't just, like, take notes? When they interviewed us in the beginning they just took notes.'

'They did tape you, just not visually.' He chose the first suite, the one with ergonomic chairs. 'Go sit down. I'll get the computer running.'

Setting up the tape was simple enough. While technicians handled the video after it had been filmed, every agent was responsible for handling the front end of the process-- one of those budgetary constraints Duo frowned on. He paused to fill the kettle. Their milk wasn't fresh, so he used lemon and honey instead. He entered the interview room to find Duo chewing his fingernail and staring at the ceiling tiles.

'This will be painless,' Zechs promised. He set Duo's cup before him, and took the seat across the table. 'What we really want to do is cover the run-up to what happened with the Asylum Centre. None of our forensic leads have panned out to anything, but I don't think we can question that the person behind all the other attacks is the one who also called in the tip on Heero.'

'It's good to know we can still inspire dedication.' Duo hunched over his tea. 'Which is what I don't get, actually. We've all had stalkers before, but most of them do something certifiably crazy before it drags on this long.'

'Go back to when you realised Heero was gone. What happened exactly?'

Duo sighed, but he obeyed without argument. 'Work ran over. I was supposed to be off at five, but I was working on a re-wire, and I wanted to get it right before I quit for the night. I didn't get home until almost seven.'

'Do you know the exact time?'

'Not exact. My train arrived at six-forty-two. It takes nine minutes to walk from the station to my apartment, if I don't rush. So it was six-fifty-one, give or take a minute.'

He smiled at that off-hand statement. Duo was probably every bit as aware of his surroundings as
Heero Yuy— he just didn't look quite as paranoid doing it. 'So at six-fifty-one, you made it home.'

'Yeah. That red flier we saw— there wasn't one of those yet. The door was unlocked, that was how I knew something was wrong. Heero doesn't leave doors unlocked. Nothing was missing except for Heero and the computer he used. I knew if he had just decided to go somewhere, he would have left me a message, a note, something. If he'd been taken by someone not legit, like private mercs or this stalker or whoever, there would've been a sign of struggle; Heero knows how to leave damage. But the place was clean and nothing was disturbed, so I figured it had to be some kind of state-sponsored. So I called the police, but they didn't know shit about—'

Zechs felt a buzz at his belt. His mobile phone. He held up a finger, and Duo paused. 'Relena,' Zechs said, recognising the number. 'I should answer. Just a moment.'

He stepped just outside the door, closing it almost entirely not just to keep Duo from overhearing, but to ensure the recording wouldn't pick up his voice. 'Zechs,' he answered, pressing the mobile to his ear.

'It's me,' his sister said. 'How are you doing, Zechs? And Duo? We were out of Brussels so quickly I didn't even have a chance to tell him good-bye.'

'He'll be all right.' He did close the door entirely, then. 'And you? Yuy?''

'Oh... all to the good.' He could almost hear the blush in that. 'Zechs, I just wanted to thank you. I can't imagine what would have happened if you hadn't been so quick on your feet.'

'That's my job. But I'm glad for both of you. And I'll pass it on to Duo.'

'Is there any chance of arranging a way for them to speak? He won't say it under pain of death, but—'

'I know exactly what you mean.' Zechs glanced behind him, and took a few steps into the shelter of the break room across from the interview suite. He'd forgot to unplug the kettle, and did it now. 'It's still not legal for Duo to have contact with any Gundam Pilot not physically in Brussels. As soon as Heero left the city, he lost the right to contact Duo.'

'It's not right,' she said, and her tone told him that she'd known the answer before she'd asked, and felt as helpless as he did. 'Well,' she continued finally. 'Then tell him we love him from afar. And you, Zechs. You really were brilliant.'

'I'm glad it worked.'

'Oh,' she said then. 'Zechs, I hate to ask this, but—' He waited, listening to her breathing change from hesitant to certain. 'I tried to find Pargan before we left for Brussels. He was supposed to come to the palace for the Christmas dinner, but he called and said he was ill. Troyes has tried to reach him, and we even checked on him at home before we left, but he doesn't seem to be there, and his car is missing. I wouldn't bring it up, but he's been so frail lately. I'm worried.'

'Did you notify the police?' he asked, unsure why she was bringing it up. 'I'm not sure there's anything I can do.'

'I did call the police. They said they visited, and that his grandson said he was all right, but I don't think they actually saw Pargan.'

'I can ask one of our locals to look in,' he decided, mostly to reassure her. 'I'll let you know.'
'I appreciate it. I suppose it's possible he's just gone to visit a relative or something-- I just thought he would tell me if he did.'

'No, it's fine. I'll let you know.'

'Thank you. Really.' She sighed against his ear. 'I'll talk to you soon.'

Duo was sitting in his chair exactly as Zechs had left him. If not for a slight-- very slight-- shift of his eyes that smelled just a little bit guilty, Zechs would have believed he hadn't moved for the duration of Zechs' call. But he didn't mention it. He resumed his seat.

'You were telling me about the police,' he said.

'Huh.' Duo laced his fingers under his chin, his elbows digging into the table between them. 'Sure. The police know about me and Heero, well, Heero mostly. He's kind of a regular, if you know what I mean.'

'I can imagine.' He wondered if Relena knew about that habit of Yuy's. Or if Yuy would feel compelled, still, to continue it in Sanq. On second thought, he didn't need to ask that question. Yuy wasn't going to change overnight, even if he was significantly safer out of Brussels. Maybe he would have that local Preventer drop in on Yuy, too, and remind him not to make a nuisance of himself where it could reflect on Relena.

'So they took me seriously, at least. They listed Heero as missing, and they put out some squad cars to look for him. They put out calls to hospitals, border patrol, public transportation. I guess it took them a couple of hours to think of the immigration angle. Inspector Dumont told me they'd taken Heero. He said they'd put him in detention and that it was likely he was going to be deported, because they'd be out to prove Heero had violated his terms. Guess it goes without saying that if they looked hard enough they'd find something they could use. They never wanted us here, but some trigger-happy jerk arrested us after the Rebellion and they've been stuck dealing with us ever since. God, it makes me so angry, you know? They've never been able to deal with us like human beings. Just liabilities. Embarrassments. Honestly I've never understood why they didn't just have us offed in prison.'

Zechs twitched just a little, aware of that tape rolling, recording that too-casual condemnation of state authorities. International authorities, really, because the decision to imprison and try the Gundam Pilots had been agreed to by quite a lot of interested parties. 'Let's stay away from blanket statements.'

'Why? Haven't they just proved it all over again? They don't care what happens to us as long as they don't have to be in the room when it does.' Duo slumped sullenly in his chair. 'Whatever. Anyway. I tried for hours to get in touch with someone at the Centre. It took me hours just to get a live person. They finally shunted me over to some lawyer who told me they might not even get to Heero's case for months. So whoever this stalker is, he's just like those guys. He's shoving us off onto someone else, hoping they'll do the dirty work. You know what I would do if I hated someone that much? I'd stick a fucking knife in them and just be done with it.'

'We're done with the interview,' Zechs overrode him, not quite in time to cover that. Then he sighed. 'Can you try not to litter this video with incriminating--' '

'No, because I'm angry and they hurt me.'

'But not Preventers.'
Duo paused open-mouthed. 'Ohhh, don't you even.'

'What?'

'I'm not looking for a job, specially not with Preventers.' Duo let out half an incredulous laugh; he sighed out the rest of into his palm. 'You wanted Heero and you'll never get him now. I am so not a substitute. I don't play like he would've.'

'Do you see me making skull caps out of babies, Duo?' Zechs demanded, irritated himself. 'You seem to be under the impression that Preventers has some deep moral fissure at its heart. Yet in the last week we've done almost nothing but stand behind the Gundam Pilots.'

'It's not that you don't try. It's that you never quite manage to do.' Duo dropped his eyes then. 'I'm not ungrateful for this. But I draw a line between standing behind us when it's personal and not standing behind us when it's not. Because I'm looking around at a damn empty office and wondering where the hell your buddies are.'

He didn't have an answer for that. Duo was right. And he'd been angry about that himself, having to beg for permission to leave L4.

'Don't write us off yet,' he murmured at last. 'At the very least, you haven't seen the garage.'

He surprised Duo into an unwilling chuckle. 'The infamous Preventers MS fleet?'

'You're wasted working on those old service drones.'

'Why don't we wait on any offers of employment.' Duo sucked on his lower lip. 'Go turn off the video. Then give me the tour.'

After the many highs and lows of the past days, there was something peaceful about just walking with Duo. They moved at a slow, ambling pace, fingers curled together, shoulders brushing every other step. He gave up the pretence of actually touring Duo quickly-- there wasn't much to see, after all. The important part was just to be moving, with Duo.

'The couch isn't mine.' Duo said, after a silence that had lasted two storeys. 'The bed is. But I got it from a charity sale we had at Small Arms. I could live without it.'

'I don't really have much furniture.'

'I've noticed. If we scavenge Heero's place, we could at least get extra chairs.'

'I think we can do a little better than recycled office pieces.' He pointed Duo ahead of him. 'That's my cubicle. And since we're here, I should follow up on a request Relena made.'

'What's Chickadee want now?' Duo sat in Tropic's chair, rolling it back and forth over the worn carpet. 'You need some personal mementos in here. We should do one of those cute couples pics, like Old Time Cowboys. Or matching golf outfits.'

'This should only take a moment.' He'd left his computer booted yesterday-- had it really only been yesterday?-- and his email opened immediately. Top of the queue was one from Sally, declaring a close to the mass involvement of Preventers in the L4 mine bombing. She named a team to stay behind, a diplomatic sprinkling from various offices from both Earth and the Colonies; the eponymous Mèo had been named team lead. Sally really was looking to recruit him, if she was personally appointing him to high-profile positions. 'I just need to enter a request for the Kalmar department.'
'Another classified thing? You need me to put on a blindfold or something?'

'No, it's fine.' He called up a request form and began to enter the data. 'Relena thinks something might be wrong with her driver.'

'Pargan? She thinks the grandson did something?'

'What?' He looked over his shoulder at Duo. 'What makes you think that?'

'Kind of the logical conclusion. You said he was a real freak on wheels. If Pargan's in trouble--'

'We don't really know that he is. Just that he didn't answer a phone call. I promised Relena someone would look in on him.' It took only moments to complete the form-- it was a fishing exercise and barely that. He left it open to the discretion of the local Preventers and gave his own name as contact. 'All done. We can go, if you like. Get a light lunch somewhere. I'll have to get back to regular office hours tomorrow when the others return.'

'Okay.' Duo helped himself to a stick of gum from the pack in Tropic's desk drawer. 'Short honeymoon, huh.'

'Do you want to take time like that? I could put in for a vacation.'

'You should stick around until it's not so crazy at work.' Duo blew a small bubble with his gum, and popped it between his teeth. 'We'll figure it out. Come on. I'm in the mood for Italian. And a big-ass bottle of wine.'

'I'm yours to command.' He shut off his computer and stood. 'So what's this about matching golf outfits?'

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Duo greeted him the next morning with breakfast in bed. Zechs was sitting up at his alarm when Duo entered their bedroom carrying a tray-- or, as Zechs discovered when it was placed on his knees, a cardboard box lid covered with a dishtowel. He smiled sleepily at Duo's ingenuity, and picked up a triangle of buttered toast. 'I could get used to this,' he murmured.

'That would be unfortunate for you.' Duo climbed back under the sheets, bumping Zechs with frozen toes. 'Figured I'd send you off in style just this once. I packed you a lunch, too.'

'I think you rather like these little domestic moments.' His plate had fresh asparagus in hollandaise, a poached egg with shavings of what tasted like parmesan. 'What will you do today?'

'Go home. Old-home. Clean up. Maybe Heero's if I can get in.'

'Are you sure you're up to it?'

'It's gotta get done. Might as well be sooner.' Duo stole a sprig of asparagus and slumped comfortably against Zechs' arm to eat it. 'You think you'll be late?'

'Possibly. We'll be debriefing all day.' He shifted to put his arm about Duo's shoulders and pressed his lips to Duo's messy hair. 'I'd ask you to come shower with me, but given how long it took us last time, maybe we should pass.'
'Oh, you're such a romantic.' Duo's fingers made a trip down his hip, making a familiar and rather possessive cup over his groin. 'You've got about ten minutes to spare, right?'

They'd made love only hours ago, before falling asleep. He'd begun to think it then, but the thought completed itself now. He carefully, gently lifted Duo's hand by the wrist, wrapping it in his hand. 'You know I'll come rushing home for you. It will be all right.'

'What's that got to do with the price of tea in China?' Duo applied lips and tongue to his neck, and Zechs shivered. 'Nine minutes, now. I can do it if you can.'

'Duo.' He kissed Duo firmly, and set his breakfast aside. 'Tonight, when we can go slow, appreciate each other. Promise.'

'You really are a romantic.' Duo accepted it quietly, though, and without offence. He even managed a small smile for Zechs. 'Go shower. Maybe I can drive to the office with you and use the car after?'

'Good idea.' He tweaked Duo's ear. 'If you get ready fast enough we could... make out in the car when we get there.'

Duo's eyes crinkled as he grinned. 'I dig how corruptible you are.'

They did, too: with the manual shift digging into his thigh as if mocking him with what he could have had if they'd stayed in bed. Duo was scrupulously keeping his hands to himself, almost as he had when they'd first been dating. And yet there was something sweet to it because of that. Zechs found himself simply petting Duo's hair, twirling soft strands over his knuckles. It was the perfect length, long enough to wrap his fist, short enough not to get in the way as his own sometimes did, never snagging on collars or trapping him in carseats. Maybe it was time for a trim.

'You're not concentrating properly,' Duo chided, and sat back before Zechs could protest. His lips were pinked and slightly swollen, and Zechs touched them with the pad of his thumb, just a bit smug to have made that happen.

'I'm thinking about a lot of things,' he admitted belatedly. 'I think I'm happy.'

'Yeah?'

'Yes.' He reached for his bagged lunch on the dash, crinkling the paper bag in his hold, and admitted a step more. 'And I like that you'll be there tonight when I get home. I never thought I would have this. A life with someone. When I was young I was too focussed on-- but even after the war, on Mars, it still never seemed a possibility, it wasn't something I could-- imagine. Now it seems the most natural possible thing.'

'I don't know if I'm really housewife material.' Duo wouldn't quite look at him, as if the concrete wall at their bumper had some deep fascination for him. 'It took Heero and me a long time to figure out just roommates.'

'I am not Heero Yuy. And maybe that's a good thing. Because I know what I want from you. I don't think Heero ever quite did.' Duo started to protest, and Zechs shushed him by leaning across the seats for a final kiss. 'I'm not saying that to be mean or to denigrate your relationship with him. Just to point out that you and I are going to have something that's unique. And maybe a little bit better for us both.'

Duo's gaze was searching, now. Zechs left himself open to it, calmly meeting Duo's eyes. Maybe Van den Broeck hadn't been so entirely off the mark with his warnings. Duo wanted him in a
niche, a little box with definable rules and expectations, the kind of box Heero Yuy had been born to fill. Zechs, on the other hand, had upset that a few times now, surprised Duo, maybe even unnerved him a little. But maybe that was precisely why Duo was drawn to him. Most of the time they worked well together. And sometimes they worked better than well, because they could choose their own direction together. People in boxes didn't make it very far at all.

'I—' Duo began.

They both started at the knock to Zechs' window. Zechs let out a deep breath before he reached for the control, to roll it down. 'Tropic,' he said. 'Good to see you planet-side.'

'Same.' Tropic was not looking at him. He was looking at Duo. 'I take it the mission was successful,' he added.

'Mission— so to speak.' Tropic did not look like he was going anywhere fast. Surrendering on the notion of a few more minutes of privacy, Zechs opened his door and exited the vehicle. Duo did the same, circling slowly around the rear and joining them in a slouch-shouldered hunch against the side of the car. 'Unfortunately, Heero Yuy did have to leave Brussels,' Zechs continued. 'But we were able to work out a compromise. He'll be in Sanq now, under the same terms of parole.'

'Interesting,' Tropic said. He sounded slightly strained, but waved off Zechs' concern as he removed a small chemical inhaler from his coat. 'Got a face-full of dust at the mines,' he said. 'The medic assures me it will pass.'

'Sorry to hear that.' Duo kicked a tyre, and Zechs glanced at him. 'Duo's using the car today,' he said, part excuse, part filler of that awkward silence. 'Duo, I don't think you've met my partner, Agent Tropic.'

'Partner?' Duo's eyes narrowed. 'I thought the bombshell was your partner, Neptune.'

'No, she just accompanied me that day.'

'And when you met with Heero, too.'

'Nevertheless.'

'Uh-huh.' Duo made no move to extend a hand, to greet Tropic in any way that even verged on polite. More of that business of not liking Preventers? But he did like Neptune, if that was what this sullenness was about, and he'd liked Cobra and Mamba too. Then again, Tropic made no attempt to cover Duo's gaffe, only regarding him inscrutably. But Tropic was always like that.

'I should go,' Zechs said at last. 'Duo, I'll see you tonight?'

'Yeah.' Duo did go through the open window to retrieve his bag lunch for him. 'Give me a ring when you're leaving and I'll be sure to meet you there.'

'All right.' He wasn't sure about kissing Duo in front of Tropic, but Duo mooted that point by opening the car door right between their bodies, and climbing in without further word. A moment later the car started. Duo nodded once to him, and then Zechs was stepping back as he pulled out of the parking slot. After a tight three-point turn, Duo was gone.

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'Why this kind of thing always happens over Christmas I'll never understand,' Mamba complained.

'That's true, it does seem to clump over the holidays,' Sally agreed.

'Maybe they're rushing to get it in by the end of the calendar year.' Neptune snagged the last of the speculoos, a Christmas biscuit supplied by Mamba, their only Belgian agent. 'Anyone have New Year's Eve plans?'

Zechs had to check that count on his fingers. 'It is New Year's Eve, isn't it?'

'Dancing,' Sally said firmly. 'I'm going to get all dolled up and find a club to crash. I've got my eye on a swank little number I saw in a boutique. Black and silver pearls all over the bodice and the back goes all the way down to here, I swear. If I don't make a dozen conquests, it won't be for lack of trying. You in, Rebeka?'

'Definitely.' Neptune dusted her fingers of cookie crumbs, giving Zechs a sly look from under the cover of long dark lashes. 'You and Duo should join us,' she said.

'I don't know,' he murmured, glancing sideways at Mamba. The black-eyed Belgian wore a Cheshire grin at his embarrassment; no secrets there. Neptune's eyeroll berated him silently for doubting her discretion. 'It's been a stressful week.'

'Which is why you need to let go. Life goes back to sucking quick enough on first January.'

'Maybe.' Duo would be tired. But maybe it would be a good thing. Get his mind off the losses of the past days, if only for a little while. And something special to mark their progress together. That warmed him to the idea. 'Let me know the address of the club.'

'Well, look at you.' Sally was openly amused with him. 'You know, a year ago you would have died before you agreed to go dancing.'

'I have a few tricks up my sleeve,' he said solemnly, then winked. Mamba guffawed, and Sally punched him lightly in the arm. 'That's my phone ringing. I should answer.'

'See you tonight, then.'

He made it to his desk just in time, and grabbed up the receiver. 'Agent Wind.'

'Agent Ulv,' was the brisk introduction. Wolf. Zechs called to mind a vague memory of a rangy woman of middle age, with bristling grey hair worn in a thick braid that wrapped around her head like a crown. 'Calling with regard to your request from yesterday.'

'Yes, the Princess' driver.' Tropic was at work on his computer, typing a report; he paused at Zechs' words, twisting in his chair to look. Zechs waved him off. 'Anything to report?'

'I had two of my youngsters go out to check as you asked. They can't enter the house without a warrant, but I wanted to let you know I am pursuing one.'

'They didn't speak to him?'

'He wasn't there, but a boy was. Records indicate the boy is on parole. He was a fishy character, raised suspicions with my men. Evasive about the subject, you understand. I want to search the house.'
'Thank you for informing me. You'll keep me abreast of developments?'

'I will.'

'Many thanks.' Zechs hung up slowly, wondering. He'd dismissed Relena's concerns initially, but now it sounded as though she may have been onto something. If only that the grandson was afraid of Preventers, having already dealt with them once. It was possible Pargan had simply ailed-- it happened, that the elderly went out, collapsed, were rushed to hospital without any identification, no way of discerning their identity. And, he supposed he had to admit, it was possible that Duo was right-- the grandson had done something and was trying to hide it. That wasn't Preventers' fault. The court had let the boy go rather than imprison or commit him, lenient toward a first-time offender. But first times had a way of becoming second times. If that was what had happened, Ulv would know, soon.

'Trouble?' Tropic asked him.

'It seems like there might be.' Zechs sat back in his chair, tapping his desk. 'Miles Pargan, the driver for Relena Peacecraft. It seems there's some difficulty in contacting him. The Princess asked me to look in on it. The locals want to search his house for evidence.'

'Search his house.' Tropic coughed, and reached for his inhaler again. 'What about Árni Olsen?'

'The grandson? Nothing to arrest him for, I gather. The situation is just odd.'

'Mm.' Tropic went back to his report. Zechs raised an eyebrow, surprised by that exchange. Tropic wasn't one for extraneous detail.

'A rough thing, on L4,' he ventured, thinking that might be behind it. 'Everyone was greatly affected.'

'L4?' Tropic cast him a queer look. 'What are you talking about?'

So much for that angle. One day he would give up looking for depths in his partner. 'It's nearing seven,' he said. 'I'm going to head home. Don't stay all night working on that report.'

'No. Good night.'

'Good night.' Zechs stood, shrugging into his coat. 'Happy New Year.'

'Mm,' Tropic said, and that was that.

**

'Dancing?' Duo seemed cautiously pleased by that. He stacked a box that clanked onto the kitchen counter. 'Do you do that? Dance?'

'Every OZ cadet had mandatory lessons. We were gentlemen as well as officers.' He flourished his hand through the air, bowing low for Duo. Duo snickered at him. 'You think there will be waltzing at this club?'

'Oh yeah, it's all the rage with the kids these days.' Duo lifted a final box to the counter, and dusted his hands. 'Your partner going to be there?'
'They might have invited him, but I shouldn't think he'd come.' Some of Yuy's chairs had made it to his apartment after all. Zechs unfolded one and sat on it. 'The others will have dates. It won't be just you and the Preventers.'

'I don't know. I'm kind of tired.'

'Then we'll stay in.'

'No, we should go.' Duo sounded certain enough, so Zechs nodded his acceptance, but he wondered what had occasioned such a quick change of heart. 'So,' Duo said then, 'it's cool to introduce me to your work mates? I'm not outing you or anything?'

'I think I outed myself, on Christmas Eve.' He snagged Duo by the belt loop when Duo passed near, and rose to hold him close. Duo settled comfortably against his chest, and Zechs wrapped him tight in both arms, liking how it felt. 'Earlier,' he confessed softly, 'Relena said to tell you. Heero misses you.'

For a moment, just a moment, Duo went horribly tense; and then just as swiftly he unwound, so completely that Zechs was nearly holding him up. 'I'm going to be sad about it for a while,' Duo said, muffled against his chest. 'Just to warn you.'

'I know.'

'Miss the racket, anyway. He snored almost as badly as you do.'

'I do not snore.' He squeezed Duo until he squawked, and then they were both laughing. 'I don't snore.'

'Are you kidding me? There's a reason I'm always awake before you. It's a good thing I'm out of work, it'll give me time to sleep it off during the daylight.'

'I don't either snore.' He scrabbled at Duo's ribs, grinning as he found sensitive spots. Duo tried to wiggle away, and he gave chase, and then they were on the carpet, and then Duo's mouth was on his, and then they were going to be late, but that didn't seem to be all that important a problem, really.
'Oh, come the fuck on,' Duo complained.

'I think it would be a very good thing. You wish to give more time, I wish to pay you for it. This is what they call a win-win, I think.' Pieter smiled the smile of a saint down at his young charge. 'Small Arms can use you. You know it.'

Zechs kept his comments to himself, even when Duo cast a pleading look in his direction. Personally, he still had reservations about Small Arms, but he couldn't fault Van den Broeck for the generosity of his offer. And it would look damn good with the parole board.

An idea that was clearly not lost on Duo. His reluctance was real, and it was probably based firmly in the grudge he was carrying about the last week. Duo was in no mood to play good for anyone.

Van den Broeck just as clearly saw it coming. Zechs would bet he'd had plenty of time to experience Duo's moods for himself. But he played Duo like an expert. He sipped his brandy, waved a hand as if to brush aside the entire conversation, and then reached into a pocket. 'I almost forgot. The children wished you to have this.'

'That's so low I can't believe it even out of a lawyer,' Duo said, but his shoulders slumped as he took the photograph Van den Broeck extended. 'Using the kids against me.'

'Cheerfully,' Van den Broeck admitted brightly. 'You may refuse me, but I think you will not refuse them. They call him Doudou,' he told Zechs, over the brim of his crystal glass. 'One of those petits noms d'amour, a little love name. They do love him.'

'Doudou?' Zechs asked.

'It's a pun,' Duo muttered sourly, but he hadn't yet taken his eyes off his picture. 'My name. It's what French kids call their teddy bears. Doudou.'

He knew. He couldn't tell if Duo liked it, the nickname. He couldn't quite imagine it. Then he thought of Heero, and changed his mind.

'I'll think about it,' Duo said finally.

'As you should. And I hope you have many competing offers, but I wanted to be first in the door.' Van den Broeck smiled fondly at Duo, and patted his hand. 'I will hold it open for you. Let me know when you're ready to decide.'

'The money's good,' Zechs said later. He washed Van den Broeck's plate and set his own beside it on the drying rack. 'And given the price of those scallops we could use a second income.'

'Hey, I was going to go with the cheap crab. You're the one who said make it special.' Duo divided the last of the brandy bottle between their two glasses, and propped himself up on the counter, heels bumping lightly on the cupboard beneath him. 'You really think the money is good?'

'For NGO work? I think Pieter wouldn't offer you less than market.'

'How much do you make?'

Zechs gave some extra concentration to rinsing their cutlery. 'A little more than... a little more than...
'You can tell me. Now that I live here I might, like, see bills and shit.'

He scrubbed a fork with the soapy flannel. 'A little more than triple that.'

'Shit.' Duo was blinking rapidly when Zechs risked a glance. 'Holy shit. I mean I guessed you made bank, but shit. Why the hell are you dating me? You could buy me. You could buy me and my apartment. And Heero's.'

'Not quite.' He rinsed his hands and dried them. 'So what do you think? About the job, not the money.'

'I don't know.' Duo kicked the cabinet, and fell back on his elbows. 'I don't know if-- I mean, I have no idea if I can sit at a desk. Like phone calls and brochures all day? That's not me. I want to work with my hands and I want to have product at the end of the day.'

'There would certainly be more administrative work, but don't forget how much time you'd have to work with the children.'

'And who says I'd even be good at that? I don't have a degree, I don't know what's going to cause lifelong trauma. What if I say the wrong thing and I fuck some poor kid up for life?' Duo worried his lower lip, staring at, doubtless, ugly visions. Had something wrong been said to him, once? Or was he thinking of Heero, too, who couldn't even bear a short conversation about war? 'I don't want to hurt these kids,' Duo said. 'They deserve better.'

'You haven't really looked for other work yet. Something else might come up that would suit you more.' Zechs reached for his glass and drank the last swallow, and decided a subject change was in order. 'So. Our regular caseload is back on. Tropic and I have put off our Syria trip twice, so maybe third time will be the charm.'

'No breaks, huh?' Duo drank, too, and set his glass down very carefully. 'I need to tell you something.'

'What is it?' He took a stance between Duo's knees, drumming lightly on Duo's denims. 'Something serious?'

'Maybe. Could be.' Duo chewed his lower lip, and sighed. 'Your partner. He's blond, mid-thirties, well-built.'

'I suppose he is. What about it?'

'That's the description Gervaas gave to Preventers. When someone took Heero's mail.'

Zechs turned his face up to the ceiling, and took in a long slow breath. 'If that's all you've got, Duo, I don't appreciate it.'

'He watched our apartments. Heero's and mine.'

'We had all of Headquarters in rotation watching your apartment.'

'No, you didn't. Cobra and Mamba and Hydra and you. I only met Neptune after the hospital, and she was never on detail here. Your partner wasn't on detail either, was he?' Duo caught his eyes, level and unblinking. 'He stood on the corner outside, in front. And he's on Heero's videotape from before you asked him to stop filming people on the street. I checked it yesterday.'
He pushed off from the counter and stood back against the stove, instead. 'I'm still waiting for you to come to a point.'

'Don't do that.' Duo sat up, his fists clenching on the counter beside him. 'Don't shut me down and do that Preventer thing where you act like I'm some criminal crud on your shoe. I'm telling you your partner isn't on the up and up, man.'

'You're making an accusation that doesn't appear to be substantiated,' Zechs countered. 'If you have something more than legal Preventers protection and an extremely broad profile then I'd be happy to hear it.' He spread his hands expectantly.

Duo looked away with an impatient eye-roll. 'This is fun. Glad we talked.'

'What do you want me to do? Investigate my partner?'

'Yes,' Duo said, as if that had been the obvious answer all along. 'Thank you.'

'I'm not agreeing to do it! Duo, does it occur to you he had legitimate reasons for whatever it is you think he's done? Assuming he's actually done anything?'

'I'd love to hear it. Truthfully. If there's a good reason for him to be watching us on private time and interfering with--'

'Possibly interfering. Assuming that one of the hundreds of thousands of other blond men in their mid-thirties weren't the ones who-- I'm not going to argue this with you.' He made himself breach the distance, and put his hands on Duo's knees again. 'I understand that Heero's-- departure-- is going to be an adjustment for you, that you don't feel as safe--'

'Condescending to me is not going to make this magically disappear, Zechs.'

'And you acting like rules don't apply because we're dating doesn't make me magically take you seriously when you're in the wrong. Now unclench.' He put his hands on Duo's cheeks, his thumbs over Duo's grinding jaws. 'Take a deep breath and step back from this for a moment. Piece by piece. Tropic wasn't my partner when we first received threats against you. He was working with Hydra then. So he absolutely had a legitimate reason for being outside your apartment.'

It took Duo a minute. 'The mail,' he said finally, and even in his tone Zechs knew their argument was fading out.

'We have no prints from the notary form. Blond is just not enough to go on, Duo.'

'Why isn't anyone watching now? If all your cases are back on the table. Why isn't there a car out there? Heero got fucking kicked out of the country and where are they? What's coming next?'

He didn't have a quick response to that. A number of thoughts went firing by, most of them contradictory and self-reversing. 'We're playing triage,' he began, and let his voice trail off.

'They're killing the case, aren't they.'

'I don't know. I don't think a decision's been made.'

'Well, find out.' Duo turned his head so that his cheek rested in Zechs' palm. 'I don't want to be some A or B option between you and your job, but if I'm not what you pick, I need to know. You were the one who went out on a limb convincing me that this threat was real. After last week, I'm in your corner on that. There's someone out there trying to get us. Am I alone now or do I have
Preventers at my back?'

**

Zechs selected a venti-sized cup from the vending, and added a generous spill of crème fraiche to his coffee to cushion the acid. Cobra smiled sleepily at him. 'Morning,' Zechs grunted.

'Morning.' She took her time choosing from their platter of breakfast foods, settling on an apple tart. 'Rough night?'

'I didn't sleep well.' More accurately, Duo hadn't slept well; he'd been up and out of bed three different times, once for more than two hours. Zechs had checked the computer logs in the morning, hating himself for suspecting anything and not entirely sure what exactly he suspected--but if Duo had been doing anything during the night, there was no evidence of it. He'd found a new bottle of wine had been opened, but it had only been missing three or four ounces, just enough to help one sleep. Their goodbyes had been truncated, and he had an unfinished sort of feeling, a great reluctance to leave with questions unanswered. But that was the job, and that was part of what they were going to have to get used to, together.

'Just a moment now,' Zechs said then, and reached for Cobra's hand. 'This is new.'

Her lean face was suddenly transformed into a bright blushing smile. 'Durral proposed. We haven't set a date, but it's exciting, still.'

'Congratulations.' He tilted her new ring to the light. 'By the size of this jewel I'd say he can hardly wait to make it official.'

Mamba set his head around the corner. 'We're on,' he told his partner. 'Morning, Wind.'

'Good morning.' He had time for a smile for Cobra before she ducked out. He capped his coffee, and left the breakroom for his cubicle. He dropped his coat on the peg and set his cup at his desk. He tapped the screen to life, and settled in.

His own partner arrived just as he was opening his email. Tropic gave him a silent nod, and departed again after dropping off his portfolio and coat. Zechs turned his chair to watch him go.

'Hey, Wind.' It was Neptune, leaning on his cubicle wall with her feet crossed at the ankles. 'Thought you'd be interested to know. We finally got in touch with Chang Wufei.'

It actually took him a moment to recognise the name. Treize, he thought guiltily, would probably have been amused by that. Cosmic irony had always appealed to Treize's ego-- but, then again, forgetting the identity of the man who'd killed him might not have been quite so appreciated.

'Chang Wufei,' he repeated rustily, and bought himself time by prying the lid from his coffee and sipping it. 'What did he have to say?'

'No disturbance on L5. He's some kind of monk, or something.'

He did remember that. 'Not a monk. Just living on monastery grounds. Studying.'

'He was a Preventer, wasn't he? Once?'
'Just after the Rebellion. But not for very long.' And now that he had more threads to that storyline, he could contextualise Chang's departure with the concurrent trial Duo and Heero had been forced into on Earth. Not surprising that the other Gundam Pilots would sever ties with an organisation such as Preventers, which had neither the ability to protect them nor the ability to employ them solely in the colonies, where they were safest. 'So he's noticed nothing?'

'Not a thing. In fact he informed me rather testily that he hasn't even met a new person in almost a year.' Neptune arched a dark eyebrow. 'These Pilots seem to pack a lot of personality. I think you got the good one.'

He had a blush of his own for that. 'I think so too,' he replied, with as much dignity as he could muster. 'Did you tell him anything? About what's been happening?'

'I gather they don't have television at the monastery, but he'd had word about the mine on L4. I think he's flying out to them, although when I tried to ask about that he told me flat to mind my own business. But he was cagey about goings-on in Brussels. He wouldn't admit to knowing about what's happened with the two here. I gave him the bare bones and played it down.'

'So what does that mean?' Zechs sipped his coffee again, though it was too hot still. 'Maybe our stalker just can't get to L5 as easily? It's a pretty homogenous cluster.'

'So we're eliminating Asians?'

'Or maybe it's just the isolation of the monastery. A closed community where everyone knows everyone would be much harder to penetrate than a city or even a small mine.' Zechs gave up trying to unearth meaning from a summary. 'Can you send me the transcript? I'd like to read it.'

'Sure, but I don't think you'll get much out of it.' Neptune looped her long hair behind her ear. 'I read your case notes. About Heero Yuy's deportation. You did good work.'

He didn't think it was his imagination that no official word had come down yet on his actions. Sally might or might not approve, personally, but her official silence on the subject was not a mark of favour. 'It was half miracle,' he said. 'And all luck.'

'Not entirely.' Neptune's sideways smile was coy. 'You're not what I expected,' she said then. 'Unorthodox, I think is the word.'

'I had-- unorthodox teachers.'

'I can imagine. Maybe you'll tell me about it, some day.' She shrugged. 'Back to work.'

'Right.' Zechs turned back to his computer, but then rose to stop her progress down the corridor between desks. 'Neptune?'

'Yes?'

'Tropic and I are headed out, probably this evening. But I'm waiting on a return call from the Kalmar office. If it comes in, could you make sure it gets to me?'

'Of course.' She came a few steps back toward him. 'Regarding?'

He took a gamble, then, banking that he could trust her on this level at least, and possibly farther, if she'd been silent so long on the subject of his identity. 'Princess Relena Peacecraft asked me to check on her driver. His grandson is the one we caught trying to approach the Princess.'
'Olsen. Right. Something's wrong with the driver?'

'He hasn't been seen in a few days. The Kalmar office was going to get a warrant for his home. I'm hoping the news is good, but at this point--'

'Understood.' Neptune hesitated, just for a second. 'Right. I'll keep you informed.'

'Duo likes you,' he said, not sure what he was saying, exactly, or why, except as a kind of thanks. 'Maybe you could check in on him. While I'm gone. If you don't mind it.'

She smiled. 'Sure. I will.'

Tropic was another hour at whatever it was he was doing. Zechs spent the time confirming their travel arrangements yet once more, hoping that this time, at least, they'd get to use it. If they delayed much longer, they might lose the little progress they'd made, and the perps they were watching would go underground. What if Duo's stalker went underground? There were distinct waves, he was beginning to think, in the attacks they'd seen. He dug out his notepad, reviewing his notes. He underlined a few points, wrote a few on a new sheet of paper, but before long he fell simply to doodling, trying to chase down mental puzzle pieces that didn't want to arrange themselves neatly.

He was jolted out of his thoughts when Tropic reappeared at last, leaning over his shoulder to steal his pad. 'Nice circles,' Tropic said, and tossed it back into his lap.

Zechs put up his pen. 'Thinking.'

'About?' Tropic sprawled in his chair. 'Are we set for Syria?'

'Yes.' Tropic was blond, yes, almost a buttery yellow. He hadn't ever paid much attention to his partner's looks. Scandinavian features, narrow-faced with deep-set, light blue eyes. Not unlike Zechs, actually. They were of a height, as well. And then he told himself again that Duo had been over the line. And then thought that Tropic had been more than just his usual kind of odd when he'd met Duo the other day. Almost hostile.

But Zechs hadn't thought it was hostile at the time. It hadn't set off any alarms at all.

'I was thinking,' Zechs said. 'About the pattern of these attacks against Relena Peacecraft and the Gundam Pilots.'

'Pattern? You think there is a pattern?'

'I'm starting to.'

Tropic waited on him, then finally let out an exasperated sigh. 'And?'

'I'm thinking that each new step was all aimed at one thing: getting the Gundam Pilots to panic and do something damning. First, dropping Preventers into their laps, where we were likely to turn up their-- less legal activities. But then the kid we caught, Árni Olsen, goes off the book, blows the game open. So the next gambits, Heero Yuy's mail theft, Duo Maxwell's GHB poisoning, both very targeted, aimed at stressing them, aimed at their individual vulnerabilities. The mines on L4... I'm starting to let go of that connection. I think it was just an unexpected opportunity. Cover for the next gambit. If the Pilots won't leave on their own, force them out. But it didn't work. In fact I'd say it backfired entirely. If the goal was to free Relena Peacecraft from the corrupt influence of the Gundam Pilots, then putting Heero Yuy physically in Sanq with her is going to be a real stressor for our perpetrator. I think there's going to be another attack.'
Tropic nodded along with his reasoning, and nothing more. Not trying to guide him. Not acting in any suspicious. Acting just like Tropic always did-- focussed and not particularly patient. In a way, that eased Zechs' mind on the matter. If Tropic had really been involved in some way, he'd be working a lot harder to make sure no-one looked at patterns that might lead back to him.

'You tell the Director?' Tropic asked.

'Not yet.' Zechs glanced at the clock. 'I'll write it up. There's time before we head for the airport.'

'And to call him.'

'What?'

'Maxwell.' Tropic pulled his portfolio off the desk and stashed it beneath his desk. 'He's a distraction,' Tropic said.

'Any relationship is a distraction,' Zechs countered, and suddenly realised he recognised this mood in Tropic from the other day, when Tropic had seen Duo drive him to work. His grim partner disapproved his personal choices. Well, Chang Wufei had one thing right. 'It's none of your business.'

'What affects you in this office and in the field is my business. And by your own logic, he's still a case subject.'

That stung. 'I believe I can police my own ethics,' he retorted coolly. 'If you doubt me so much, request a partner who meets your standards.'

'You're a good agent, Wind. All I'm saying is that I hate to see you endanger that.' Tropic stood. 'I'm going to get our gear from the Quartermaster. Write up your report. And then do yourself a favour and clear your head for the mission.'

**

Damascus was hot, dry, and discontented.

Treize had always been of the belief that the Middle East should be avoided. Their campaigns against first Alliance and then the Resistance had been confined to small, strategic areas-- ports, oil fields, and nuclear refineries. Get in and get out, Treize had ordered. We can't afford to get bogged down.

That appeared to be a universal truth, even in times of peace. They had no sooner paid for the rental car that they hit a traffic jam. And they no sooner cleared that jam when they found themselves in another, all before they reached the suburbs. Zechs drove until they were out of the city, and begged off with a headache when they made their first stop at a highway services. Tropic returned from the food court with felafel and chicken shawarma. The food put him in a better mood, but he was still exhausted by the time they reached their destination, Al-Qamishli, right at the Turkish border.

Their hotel was near the centre of town, a blank-faced affair of white-washed brick with long strings of ivy spilling out of every window. There was more greenery on the roof, and a swath of bright scarlet tenting that extended over the courtyard below. 'Charming,' Zechs said, breaking the
five-hour silence.

'Mm,' Tropic said.

Zechs extended most of his Arabic on check-in. Tropic managed a full conversation with their hosts, and got to the important points about internet and border control. It was nearly nine when they were finally able to climb the stairs-- a lot of stairs-- to their fifth-storey room. Zechs twisted the key in the lock, kicked open the door, dropped his bags, and sat directly on the nearest of the twin beds.

'I'm getting old,' he muttered, and stuffed a pillow behind his head.

'What, a fifteen hour flight and a mere nine on the road, and you're defeated?' Tropic had to stagger an extra few steps to the other bed, and spread himself flat in an impressive sprawl. 'You know Hydra is only twenty-two? I don't even remember being twenty-two.'

'Most of those years are probably wasted getting from one place to another.' Like his career in OZ. Travel was another thing Treize had abhorred. And Treize had had a private jet.

'Our contact is supposed to meet us at eight tomorrow.' Tropic rolled, and turned on the lamp between their beds. 'We get an interpreter and a driver, too.'

'Good idea.' Save their energy for thinking instead of worrying about the roads. 'And we're meeting with some of the girls who've been brought in for asylum applications?'

'Here and in Turkey as well.'

Duo had given him a pamphlet from Small Arms. It was in the front flap of his backpack. He freed it with a few weak yanks, and settled back on his pillow with it. Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration for Child Soldiers. It wasn't the closest analogy to young women who had been sold into sexual slavery, but he was plagued by some of Duo's worries about inadvertently adding to their trauma by doing something insensitive during the interviews, and Preventers didn't have much by the way of specialty training. Tropic and he didn't make the most reassuring pair, and that couldn't be mitigated except by his attitude tomorrow.

*The objective of DDR is to enable a safe and peaceful transition from military to civilian life. This process is different with children, as opposed to adults, because efforts to re-integrate a child ex-combatant into their community must address the basic violation of that child's human rights, emphasising three main components: family reunification, psychological support and education, and economic opportunity.*

Interesting. Duo had said that Heero was involved in online education programmes, where Duo had gone the route of finding paid work. But neither had a family. Neither had anyone to go back to, except for each other.

*Primary services upon separation from military involvement must include food, clothing, and medical care. Although child soldiers can suffer from a variety of illnesses, some of the most pressing are malnutrition, open or infected wounds, STDs, and drug addiction.*

God. That had been Heero Yuy. Which had been Duo?

*Once their condition has been stabilised, children can be slowly integrated into local schooling, or, if they are older, can take part in vocational and skills training. Integration Centres should also provide psychological support activities, such as art, singing and dancing, storytelling, and basic play. Finally, Integration Centres are responsible for tracking the families of child soldiers and...*
preparing those communities for the return of the child.

So the girls they would be interviewing were likely being given some of those services; their brief mentioned, very shortly indeed, support efforts. So that might be one way to approach it. Rather than presenting themselves as inspectors, as Preventers-- as soldiers-- it might be better to appear to be part of that ongoing support staff.

Long-term care and follow-up is a necessary part of re-integration. Child soldiers often experience difficulties for many years following disarmament, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress, disobedience, aggression, paranoia, and violence.

Maybe he should send this pamphlet to Relena. Then again, she was a donor to Small Arms. Suddenly that didn't seem like just a favour to Duo. Relena was smart enough to read the material she was committing to. She knew what she was getting into with Heero. And maybe that had something to do with her continued presence in their lives, locked as they had been in Brussels. Christmas dinners with a friendly ex-lover might be explained away, but with Duo? Maybe that was more of a stretch than he'd thought about at the time. But supporting two people she believed had been wronged, who were struggling to, what, re-integrate? Giving them a chance to feel normal, if only for a night. Giving them a feeling of family.

'Tomorrow,' he began, and rolled his head to look at Tropic. He didn't finish his sentence. Tropic was out cold, mouth slightly open, one shoe off and the other only loosened at the ties. Zechs reached for his backpack again, and pulled out his mobile. He made sure their room was secure, and then he went back to the stairwell.

He found a strong signal on the roof, empty of diners and dimmed for the night. The stars were much brighter here than in Brussels, and there was a cool breeze off the desert that smelled musty, like sage and sand. Zechs pulled a chair away from one of the tables toward the edge of the roof, where he could stare out over the city, and he dialled.

Duo answered after five rings. 'Hey,' he said sleepily. 'You landed?'

'Yes.' He pulled his coat closed against the chill night air as it ruffled his hair. He searched for a spare elastic in his pocket. 'Were you in bed?'

'Am. Had the phone on your pillow.'

He smiled to himself. 'Almost as good.'

'I downloaded an app that sounds like snoring. They don't quite have the pitch right, but it's keeping me company.'

Now he grinned. 'You're going to ride that snoring horse until it's dead, aren't you.'

'I take leverage where I can find it. You okay? You sound really beat.'

'I'm all right.' He watched a taxi trawl the street below, until it turned a corner around another building. 'Just wanted to hear your voice. Talk to me. Tell me how you are.'

'I finished Heero's apartment today.' There were soft rustles, and the sound of Duo's voice came closer, as if the phone were nestled just by his lips. 'Put some shit in boxes for him. I found his porn.'

'Maybe it's better that I can't really imagine that.'
Duo chuckled softly. 'It's pretty innocent stuff. Straight boys are so boring. Anyway. Brought the rest of it back. You care if I set up the computers?'

'Not at all. You can use the exercise room if you want.' He let his head fall to the back of the chair. 'I was thinking. About the job with Small Arms.'

'Yeah? What about it?'

'I think you should take it. I think you're the right person for this. You understand it. You've been through it. And you care. There are enough bad things happening out there that we can't do anything about.'

'What about Preventers?'

'We'll always need more people in Preventers. But I think you're needed more doing work that you believe in.'

Duo was quiet for a while, but Zechs could hear him breathing. He listened to that, just those soft exhales, as a minute ticked by, and a second one, a third. He didn't push.

'I miss you,' Duo said finally. 'I put something in your pack for you. In case you missed me too.'

He had it at his knee. He pulled it up into his lap. 'Where?'

'Front pocket.'

He dug a hand in, past his visa, his plane ticket, a packet of gum, a half-empty bottle of water. There, something wrapped in tissue. Ribbon.

'You know I'm a snoop. I kind of, sort of, went through your desk at Headquarters, that day. Found it there. Gathering dust. You never listened to it, did you?'

It was the thumbdrive, that Duo had given him before Christmas. It seemed a very long time ago, now. Not quite a full month. 'I didn't,' he admitted. He shucked the tissue. There were earbuds wrapped around the drive, too. They plugged into his phone, and so did the drive. 'Can I sleep to it?'

'Tracks thirty-four and up. The stuff before that is all for exercising. But the last track is the special one.'

The music was loading. He thumbed through the tracks, scrolling to the last. It was only labelled 'Unnamed 12/09/201'. 'I'll listen as soon as I hang up.'

'Okay.' Duo yawned. 'You think you'll be able to check in again? Before you come back?'

'Maybe. I'll try. Duo-- I miss you, too.'

'Be good, Zechs.'

'You too.' He had to work himself up to ending the call. He dropped his head back again, and didn't lift it for a long time. He shivered in an errant wisp of wind. He lifted the earbuds, and fitted to them to each ear. He pressed 'play'.

'Hey, hot stuff. Me speaking. So. We're approaching kind of a significant point, I guess-- our first major holiday as a couple. Well, a non-sex-having couple. And yes, I say that knowing full well that someone is probably going to hear this in the universe, some day. Anyway. I thought it would
be a nice thing to mark our progress as said couple by saying something significant about it. I tried to write something, but I'm not really good at that, so I'm going off the cuff, in case you haven't realised from the way I'm rambling. So, um-- mostly I guess I want to say that I've really enjoyed getting to know you. You surprise me in a lot of ways. And I like that. Sometimes I start thinking that I'm never going to be surprised by the world again, you know. Life-- you know, we've talked a little, and I know you know what I mean. You start to forget that people don't automatically want to screw with you. And I know I talk a good game about my life here, but honestly, honestly-- you're the best thing that's happened to me here. You may have figured out from the amount of time I have to spend with you that I don't really have a lot of, like, friends. Pretty much Heero, and I don't begrudge him wanting to move on. But you make me feel like things are okay. And I really like how that feels. I really like you. So-- I hope I haven't scared you off with this, but I just really want you to know that you make me happy. So-- okay. Happy Christmas, Zechs. I'm glad we'll be spending it together.'

Zechs took a deep breath. The stars were still there when he looked up for them again. So clear, the sky out here, away from the bright cities. When the moon was full it must have been like a beacon, out here, almost as bright as the sun.

He pushed 'play' again, and closed his eyes to listen.
It was rapidly clear that Zechs and Tropic were not the appropriate persons to be interviewing young Arabic women.

Their blonde hair and pale skin caused little enough stir beyond a few curious stares; foreigners were common enough. It was their height, their muscles, their uniforms, and their inescapable masculinity. Girls who talked freely amongst themselves turned silent and troubled when they approached. Even with the support of their translator, a local widow, they got no-where as soon as their presence was noticed. It turned Tropic surly and impatient. Zechs could think of no way to defuse the situation that wouldn't take weeks of acclimation, assuming any of the girls would ever get used to them.

'It's the most under-reported crime in Syria,' Bassam, their guide, shrugged. 'Even more than rape. Even when the police arrest people, they just send them off to the border, and their pimps bring them right back. The girls who come here are lucky. The government don't support the laws. No-one is ever put on trial. Before the war, we knew who was involved in prostitution. The taxi drivers knew the pimps, and the pimps knew the government men, and we knew because the police wouldn't touch them. Now, though, it's much worse. The police ignore the foreigners entirely. Iraqis and Lebanese, mostly, but a lot of whites here, too-- Russians and Eastern Europeans. They hand out pamphlets in the markets. If you see a girl in a club, she's trafficked. No question.'

'It can't all be war-time displacement,' Tropic said, disbelieving.

Bassam gave his weary shrug again. He was a drawn-looking man who smoked viciously and drank thick Arabic coffee as if it were water. He hadn't smiled once that Zechs had seen, but the girls didn't flinch at his stern presence. 'There's always a crowd for commercial sex,' he told them in his fluid English. 'Tourists, locals too poor to get a wife. A young girl goes for five hundred, an older girl maybe only a hundred. A sick one or an ugly one, less. The girls here, we don't get many in their prime. Mostly girls who are pregnant, or infected. We do a lot of drug rehab. And if they're lucky, they can stay here. If they're not...'

'And what about the pimps?' Zechs asked him. 'It's a little more professional than just the exploitative uncle or the poor family relying on the girl's income.'

'I think so too,' Bassam said, 'but finding a girl who's not too terrified to speak isn't easy. They're told their families will be killed. That their sisters and schoolmates will be taken. And they see we can't protect them for long. We ask the same questions you do, Agents. If we had answers, we wouldn't need you.'

'It's no good,' Zechs finally told Sally. 'We've been at this for a week and we've made no progress. There's too much cultural and sexual baggage here. We're talking to the two pimps they've detained, but they're little more than drivers. We're not going to get much information here.'

'One disappointment after another. Cobra and Mamba struck out on their West Africa uranium chase.' Sally sighed, and their web camera connection pixellated into fragments before reforming seconds later. 'At least we have a solid win from L4. Mavise Winner agreed to go back in on FreeSpace as an informant. It was your idea-- if you want lead, why don't you just come back and take over? We can put Cobra and Neptune on the prostitution rings. Probably they should have been on that from the beginning.'

'We're learning from our mistakes.' Zechs offered a conciliatory shrug. 'Probably you were right.
We're spread too thin and we're taking on specialised tasks beyond our capabilities. We're better prepared for something like the FreeSpace op.'

'Here's hoping.' Sally's smile was grim. 'Zechs-- we have a fight coming. Trying to change our direction and keep ourselves afloat at the same time. Can I count on you?'

'Of course.'

'Then I want you to formally reconsider the question of becoming my Deputy. You don't have to answer right this moment, and I'd prefer you not to-- I want you to really think about this. I need someone in full support of my agenda, and I need someone who brings influence, competence, and respect. That, my friend, is you.'

'I... heard you might be entertaining other candidates.'

'Only if I have to, Zechs.'

Zechs rubbed the stubble on his chin, and heaved a sigh of his own. 'I'll think about it,' he agreed quietly. 'I'll let you know.'

Tropic announced himself with a knock just as Zechs was disconnecting. 'They're starting to put dinner out,' he told Zechs. 'You hungry?'

'Better eat your fill. We'll have to head out before dark if we want to make it to the airport in time for our flight.'

'Leaving so soon?' Tropic stripped his sweat-soaked shirt and shook out a fresh white tee. 'I can't say I'll miss it here. This climate is deadly.'

'We're made for northern weather,' Zechs agreed. 'The Director thinks maybe the women will do a better job than us.'

'Not a better job,' Tropic muttered righteously. 'Can't make those idiot children talk to us.'

'They're not idiots. They're hurt and frightened. Men have treated them badly.' Zechs wiped a hand over his own damp brow. 'But no longer our case. I booked us a flight out early tomorrow morning. Let's eat and then get on the road.'

'You know, there is one thing we didn't try.'

'I thought we were in agreement it would be too difficult to train the translator to conduct the interviews.'

'No, I'm thinking more about how to remove the middle man entirely.' Tropic sat on his bed with a boot between his knees, picking out pebbles with a pocket knife. 'They tried it on the Turkish side of the border, but more than a year back, and anyway you know how they are with trafficked women-- they arrested all the girls and deported them instead of trying to trace them back to the source. But if we start here, I mean if we managed to get a foot in the door on this side of the border, we might be able to find out who's running the Syrian ring. We could, potentially at least, trace these girls back to the men who are picking them off the street.'

Zechs cracked his knuckles, thinking that through slowly. 'Are you saying what I think you are?'

Tropic nodded sharply. 'We go under cover. Buy a girl. And turn her pimp on his higher-ups,'
'We're not authorised,' Zechs answered. 'Besides which, an operation like that could take weeks to plan, much less carry out.'

'Aren't you the one who's always stretching the rules? We give it a try, and if it flops, it flops. We'd be no worse off than we are now.' Tropic waved his knife in a little circle. 'Our identities are only known to the staff at the centre. We know the names of the dance hall dealers from our two pimps in jail. All we'd have to do is walk into a disco and lay down cash.'

'And what do we do with the girl?' The more he imagined it, the more it disturbed him. 'I'm not sure there's not an ethical line being crossed in there, somewhere. And you're the one who's always so keen on ethics.'

'We send her off with the money and a warning. We'd be saving her, really. What's unethical about that?' Tropic dropped his boot to the carpet and stuffed his foot into it. 'Let me put it to you this way. We go home empty handed if we leave in an hour. Or we waste a few extra hours tonight trying something that might just yield good intel. I don't see a reason not to try.'

There were certainly arguments he could have made, Zechs thought later. Arguments he should have made. Not least of which, if he were going to apply to be Sally's deputy, that it was the wrong time to be flouting the chain of command. But that wasn't what made him so uncomfortable as they paid their fee at the door of a dark, green-lit dance club. The music was deafening, metallic where it spewed from man-sized speakers, bleary renditions of traditional tunes. Small bistro tables formed a ring around the open dance floor; Tropic and he were escorted to a table near a corner, seated with other conspicuously white guests. One spoke in drunken French, and raised his glass to them as they took their seats. Zechs turned his face stiffly forward.

The dance floor was almost exclusively occupied by girls. Though the men attending the hall were mostly middle-aged, Zechs didn't see a single girl who looked twenty. One who passed in a green satin skirt with down-cast eyes had the flat chest and slim hips of a pre-teen, her cheeks still chubby with childhood. Zechs poured water from their table's carafe and drank all of it. 'We shouldn't be doing this,' he told Tropic.

'You're a prude,' Tropic replied. He was hawk-faced, staring around him attentively. 'We're not doing anything wrong, Wind.'

It didn't feel that way. Zechs had never done anything so consciously-- dirty. 'What do we do now?'

'Now we choose. One who hasn't been in it too long, I would think. But one who's been around long enough to know something.' Tropic tapped his fingers in time with the heavy beat as girls shuffled, bored and tired, past their table in pairs. 'There,' Tropic said, and pointed. 'In the blue and gold.'

Zechs squinted. It was so dim it was almost difficult to pick her out. 'I don't know.'

'We give it a try. If she's not a likely prospect, we'll pick a different one.' Tropic caught the eyes of their escort, and pointed at the girl again. The man disappeared into the crowd. Zechs poured another glass of water, but it didn't help him much.

In less than a minute their escort was back with the girl. She was pretty, or would have been, without the heavy make-up and skin-tight dress. Her eyes slid away from them as she arrived at their table. Their escort provided her a chair, and she sat, skittishly tucking her hands beneath her thighs. Her dark hair fell over her shoulder as she ducked her head.
'What's your name?' Tropic asked her. 'You speak any English?'

'Fatimah,' she mumbled. 'I speak a little.'

Her voice was high and clear as a flute. Zechs revised his estimation of her age downward. Fourteen. He clutched his waterglass so hard his fingers ached.

'Don't be scared,' Tropic told her. 'We only want to talk to you. Do you mind talking to us, Fatimah?'

She glanced up, hazel eyes peeking from under streaks of kohl. 'Only talk?'

Tropic took the last of their travel cash from his shirt pocket, and laid it on the table. 'Only talk,' he said firmly, and shifted the top bill with a finger, so that the face of his badge was just visible.

Fatimah's gasp was loud enough to attract the attention of the drunk Frenchman at the next table. Zechs made no move to stop the girl's sudden run, though Tropic swore and almost stood.

'What you ask for?' the Frenchman leered at them. 'These shy beauties need a gentle touch, my friends, oui?'

'What did you expect?' Zechs told Tropic. 'Let's just go. She'll only tell her friends to avoid us.'

'Then we'd better get to one of them before she has time to spread it around the room.' Tropic swept up the cash and pocketed it, then thrust out a finger. 'That one. With the braid.'

'Hold on.' His mobile was buzzing. Zechs recognised an HQ office number, and ducked out for the nearest hallway. Sheltered at least a little from the noise, he accepted the call, and pressed the phone to his ear. 'Wind.'

'It's Neptune.' She paused, and added curiously, 'Do I hear music? Where are you?'

There was no possible way to explain. 'What's up?' he asked her instead. 'News?'

'Right. Your call you were waiting for, from Sanq. I have bad news.'

'What's happened?' He checked his time. They were still in afternoon hours in Brussels. 'They didn't find Miles Pargan?'

'They did, actually. Buried in the yard under the perennials.'

Of all the things he'd expected to hear, that was not one. His stomach sank. 'Murdered?'

'As much as two weeks ago. He died from massive brain injury. Half his head was bashed in.'

Zechs leaned his head back on the wall. 'Damn. What a terrible way to die.' Then he straightened. 'The boy. His grandson?'

'Missing. Whatever sparked him to do this, he apparently tried to ride it out at first-- he showed up at his parole programme, answered the phone for a few days. When the local Preventers first came around looking for Pargan, though, he spooked. He was gone when they came back with a warrant. And he took the time to leave a false trail. They grounded a flight thinking he was on it, but it seems he used the time to slip past the border in a stolen car. The car didn't turn up on our radar until they'd found the body. They're trying to trace his steps, but he's gone.'

'What's been done to secure Relena-- the Princess?' he corrected quickly. 'Spider and Orange?'
'With her everywhere she goes. She's as safe as she can be made without a total lockdown, and so far that's not been warranted.' Neptune was silent long enough that Zechs checked his phone for their connection. 'All right, I'll be blunt. When are you coming back? Your case just blew open.'

'We're on a flight in--' He checked his phone again for the time. 'About eight hours, now. We'll be on the road in five minutes.'

'I'm on the road too. I'll watch Duo tonight.'

'He'll let you in the apartment. Tell him I asked.' Zechs blew out a deep breath. 'All right. We're moving.'

'Check in when you land.' With that, Neptune disconnected. Zechs pocketed his phone, and went back to the dance hall.

'We need to go,' he told Tropic, bending down to speak quietly. There was another girl at their table. If the first one had been young, this one looked older, jaded to the idea of two foreigners looking for a night out. She gave him a brief, joyless smile at his approach, but her eyes dropped quickly to his clothes, assessing his worth.

'I think she might have useful information,' Tropic muttered back. 'She claims to be eighteen.'

'Does she claim to be able to count?' She was older than the last girl, but not that much. 'Árni Olsen murdered his grandfather and fled Sanq. We need to get back to Brussels immediately.'

'Olsen?' Tropic twisted to look at him. 'He-- who?'

'Árni Olsen,' Zechs repeated impatiently. The one stalking Relena Peacecraft, the one behind the threats to the Gundam Pilots. And he could be anywhere, which means we have to be in Brussels, now.'

In the dim flashing lights of the club he couldn't read Tropic's sudden tension, but there was urgency in it, enough to hesitate him in his attempt to speak. 'What about this case?' Tropic said finally. 'This case is just as important.'

'And won't be any worse for waiting until we can get back to it. Come on, Tropic.' He liberated their cash from Tropic's pocket without waiting on an answer, and passed it to the girl's startled hand. 'Now.'

'Wind... Maybe I can stay behind, finish up here.' Tropic stood when Zechs dragged at him, but didn't make it past his chair. 'It doesn't need both of us.'

'With the Princess of Sanq in danger?'

Tropic heaved a deep breath. He nodded once, and followed Zechs out the door.

**

He had three updates in the air, one notifying him that seven reports had come in potentially identifying Olsen at a bus depot and two different airports, and another from Spider reporting that Relena had cancelled a public banquet under the pretence of grief for her murdered driver. The
third was from Neptune, a cryptic little message that Duo was three kinds of trouble and all of them smart-mouthed. But that didn't mean danger, so Zeche didn't try to reply. The moment their plane landed, he and Tropic bullied their way to the tarmac, not even waiting for the plane to pull up to the gate. Security provided their luggage, and escorted them through Staff Only doors to the big cargo lifts. Zechs tapped impatiently all through their ride, trying to school himself into the proper professional reserve and failing, he was sure, rather miserably. Tropic was appropriately stone-faced, ignoring both his partner and the rest of the world as they climbed past the concourse and to the lobby. Zechs didn't ask if Tropic wanted to drive; he was in no mood to let anyone else delay him. He had them rolling almost before Tropic was seated in the passenger side. He waited only until they'd sped out of the parking garage to activate the hands-free car phone. 'Call HQ,' he commanded. 'Extension 4583.'

Tropic broke their silence as the ring tone began to chime. 'I thought you'd be heading toward Maxwell,' he said.

Zechs spared his partner a sideways glance. 'Neptune is with Maxwell,' he replied shortly. 'We need to check in and find out the entire situation.'

'Including the colonies?'

'What?'

'Including the colonials. The three Gundam Pilots in Space. I thought you thought they were connected to this stalker threat, too.'

'I thought you thought they weren't.' They were in mid-day traffic. Zechs kept his hand off the horn with considerable effort. His eyes were sandy and his head felt stuffy after so long travelling, and he knew his temper was too short for courtesy. 'Did you change your mind?' he asked, striving for a tone of polite curiosity, and saved only by the fact that Sally finally answered the call.

'Wind,' she opened abruptly. 'You're back in country?'

'In Brussels and headed for HQ. Tropic is here with me.'

'Welcome back,' she greeted them. 'We've had a confirmed sighting of Olsen. A port attendant identified him by his tattoos. We know he boarded a commercial carrier that puts in to both Hamburg and Rotterdam. We put out alerts, but no-one saw Olsen debark at either, and it'll take us hours still to process the passenger manifest. But he fooled us with the plane ticket, before. At this point, we can't be sure where he is. Or if he just took off for climes unknown to find himself a new life.'

'Leaving justice behind him.' Zechs forgot to signal before he turned, and a horn trailed him as he zipped around the curve. 'Has the Princess been told about Pargan?'

'Yes. She's devastated. We've moved both her and Yuy to her summer residence in Malmö.'

'It's not as well-known as the Sanq Palace, but is she really safest there? The palace staff would know Olsen by sight, wouldn't they?'

'We discussed the options and felt she'd be safer at a place with limited personnel and greater security. The palace is too open to the public, and Olsen can be expected to know his way around. Malmö has only ever been open to members of the immediate family.'

That mollified him. 'What about Maxwell?' he asked then. 'What are our options for his safety?'
'We can't remove him from Brussels, obviously,' Tropic said sharply. 'It would be illegal.'

'No, we're much more limited with Duo,' Sally agreed grimly. 'We can move him to a hotel, but we can't swing that in the budget without credible and immediate threat, and without knowing where Olsen is, we don't meet the criteria. Neptune and Hydra are scheduled to Maxwell until further notice.'

There was a subtle point going unspoken in that-- namely, that Neptune and Hydra alone were assigned to Duo, and not Zechs. He could no more go home to his lover now than he could drop in on his sister. He was Preventer Agent Wind, right now, and any identity outside of that was as good as vanished. And he had no recourse but to accept it. And hope Duo would listen to Neptune.

'And the three Gundam Pilots in Space?' he asked Sally, finally coming back to Tropic's question. 'Are we still watching them?'

'They're together at the Winner complex on L4. Mèo is alert to the Olsen problem, but he doesn't have the people to actually guard them. There's an APB out to the shuttleports.'

'I think,' Tropic said cautiously, 'maybe Wind and I would be better placed in the colonies.'

'What? Why?'

'Maybe,' Sally agreed, and Zechs' stomach sank. 'Let's give Olsen another few hours to surface-- I'd hate to relocate two agents only to find out Olsen was headed here all along. For the moment, the Earth-bound vics are the ones that worry me. So get back to HQ and we'll sort ourselves out.'

**

The Kalmar office had forwarded him the photo record of the search of Pargan's house in Sanq. It made for grim observation.

The neat kitchen Zechs had sat in was completely overturned. Dirty dishes and discarded food marked Olsen's life after Pargan's murder-- a boy unused to caring for himself trying to cope with daily life. Preventers had added to the chaos by ripping out cabinets and sinks, turning out cupboards. The small bedroom that had housed the old man was tidy and clean in initial video, but Olsen's room, in contrast, was everything that could be expected from a dangerous and unbalanced mind. The walls were hung with hand-drawn arcana: disturbing symbols and scenes playing out in stark black and white. There were dozens of close-ups of the artwork, and Zechs printed a full ream of them for study. He carried them to one of the interview rooms to spread them out over one of the big tables.

'What's this in the centre here?'

Sally. Zechs spared her a glance and then turned his attention to the photograph she was examining. 'I'm not sure,' he admitted, 'but it appears in several of these. Look.'

'I think it's a monogram.' Sally lifted the print to their projector, displaying the image in man-size proportion on their screen against the wall. 'An angel?'

'Those do seem to be wings.'
'And some kind of crown.' Sally traced the edges of it with a finger. 'What's this long piece, then?'

'Let's run a search on some images.' Zechs stepped into the adjacent room to fetch a laptop, and started it on a database inquiry of angels, angelic iconography, religious symbols. When he returned, Sally was re-arranging his photo array. 'Seeing a pattern?'

'Not sure.' She stood back with her hands on her hips. 'I keep thinking these look like monograms, but the closer you look the more it seems not. Have you been in touch with the Kalmar office? Have they figured any of this out?'

'Not as of an hour ago. They're mostly absorbed with the clean-up and with securing Relena.' He twitched one print closer to another. 'Stand back here. Further. Does it look different from farther away?'

He watched her squint and frown, turning her head this way and that. 'Switch the third and fifth prints. And up-end that one-- no, left. There. You know, I think you're onto something. Come look.'

Zechs joined her against the wall. At first all he could see were the individual letters, hidden within swirls of ink. 'A word puzzle?'

'An anagram, maybe. Or an acronym.' Sally grabbed a pen and began to copy down the letters. Zechs pointed out two more wrapped in drips of inky blood dripping from a sketched dagger. 'Get the computer working on this too.'

'I will.' Zechs checked his mobile. 'Where did Tropic go?'

'A nap in the crib. You should join him. You're looking rough.'

He let that pass without comment. 'I've had a call from Mèo. He doesn't want to lose momentum on FreeSpace. He's right. If this is an op we're going to run, we should be working on it now.'

'Are you telling me that because you want me to order you to pick a station?' Sally asked tolerantly. 'I can give you orders if you want them.'

'No.' He settled himself with a deep breath. 'I can balance the two. I'm-- informing you that I'll be splitting my time.'

'All right.' Sally handed over her pen and paper. 'Go run that search on the monograms and keep me informed of any developments.'

'I will.'

He managed to distract himself for several hours by working on mission specs for the FreeSpace undercover operation. There was certainly plenty of interest in it, and Mèo had supplied a good amount of information on a short turn-around. Mavise Winner's interview notes made for interesting reading, as well, rife with Colonial politics. That was an insular and complex world, and Zechs had only brushed against it in his tenure in White Fang. Every faction had a deadly enemy, and alliances between groups tended to be issue-based, short-termed and changeable. FreeSpace were not new, but rather revived, and from Winner's debrief it seemed that they'd only recently become violent. The Winner resource mines were not the only target, and FreeSpace would be emboldened by their success with the bombs. There would be more incidents, surely. If Mavise could convince FreeSpace to let her in on their plans, Preventers had a real chance to halt the next atrocity before it happened.

But inevitably he found his attention falling back to those photographs of Pargan's cottage in Sanq.
Though he hadn't known the man in a long time, it seemed such an unjust thing, this final murder. To have survived the fall of Sanq, the long years of war after, to have stood so loyally by Relena's side, only to fall prey in old age to a grandson who had been loved despite terrible flaws. Did Olsen feel any remorse? Zechs couldn't even imagine it, living in that cottage while his own flesh and blood lay buried in the garden just outside the front door.

When he checked on the search inquiry results, he wasn't much enlightened. Several thousand entries had been returned on the search for angels, and there were just as many results in the search for angelic art. Zechs gave up after only a quick perusal. The anagram decoder had made considerable progress on the monograms he and Sally had picked out from Olsen's bedroom posters, and Zechs scanned the list looking for anything that made any kind of sense. He printed the list and began to circle the ones that seemed like real possibilities.

Armies Ink. Airmen Ski. A Mine Risk-- that twitched the old nerve wanting to connect Olsen to the L4 disaster, but he reluctantly concluded that was unlikely. They hadn't found any evidence that Árni Olsen even knew FreeSpace existed, much less that he cared about Colonial environmentalist movements. A Miser Kin. Maker I Sin. That might work with the angel imagery-- except that in the rest of the cottage there were no real religious indicators like crosses, holy books, rosary beads like the plain coral rope that Duo kept in his bedside drawer. Amen I Risk. Mean I Risk. Risk I Name. I Ink Smear. Arni Misken-- what had been the mother's name? The father's? Zechs diverted to check the file, but that was a bust. Bara and Latham. No good there. Air Me Inks. As Rime Kin. Rank Em I Is-- no, slang like that wasn't common in Europe. An Me I Risk sounded more poetic, oratorial, but it wasn't a quote he recognised and it didn't seem to bear any relation to the rest of Olsen's drawings.

Something was tugging at a memory. He checked his shortened list again, wondering-- might be--

He headed for the door at a run, and met up headlong with his partner. 'Come with me,' he said, snagging him by the elbow and dragging him toward the lifts. 'I think I've hit on something, but I want the Director to hear it.'

'On the Olsen case?' Tropic followed him into the lift, and hit the button for Sally's floor. 'I just talked to Hydra, by the way. All's quiet with Maxwell. Neptune is back with him for the night. So far it's quiet on L4, too-- no sightings at the ports. Though that isn't to say Olsen couldn't get through. Port security isn't airtight.'

'Do you think Olsen is capable of sneaking on through Baggage? Half who try it die in transport.'

'And the other half make it past Immigration without so much as a whisper.' Tropic rubbed at his stubbled jaw. 'Still, he'd have better luck at any port on Earth. If this kid has any brains, he'll disappear and leave us a cold trail to track.'

'I'm not sure he's all that smart. In fact, I think we can count on him to make more of these wild mistakes.' They exited into the management offices, and Zechs led the way to Sally's door. It was propped open, and he knocked once as courtesy. Sally gestured them in.

'I don't know why I didn't think of it earlier,' Zechs told her. He placed his pad on her desk facing her. 'Those monograms. They spell out a word, just as we thought-- but Olsen isn't a primary English speaker. He was raised in Sanq-- or, as the borders were then, in Norway. And I think the word this spells is Maskineri.'

'Mask what?'

'\textit{Maskineri},' Tropic repeated grimly. 'It's the Norsk word used for mecha.'
'Mecha?' Sally looked at him sharply. 'As in mobile suits?'

'Exactly as in mobile suits,' Zechs said. 'And perhaps a certain mobile suit in particular.' He flipped to the print where they'd found the 'M'. 'Rather than a crown and sword, I believe these are the crest and dober gun attachments for the suit. And with the wings, we can narrow it down even more. This has to be Wing Zero, the Gundam that Heero Yuy piloted.'

'God, I think you're right.' Sally held the print up to the light of her desk lamp. 'It's so stylised I wouldn't have made the connection, but I think you're right. And it fits perfectly with the entire case profile. Olsen sees the Gundams as threats.'

'So he's headed for Heero Yuy?' Tropic guessed. 'But then, he can't be. Yuy's in Sanq.'

'But Olsen might not have known that when he cut out of town,' Sally pointed out. 'There's been very little news coverage that Yuy was moved out of Brussels.'

'So we assume he's coming here, then.'

'That's my best guess,' Zechs confirmed. 'And he's had time to get here by now. I think we should act on the assumption that he'll turn around the minute he learns the truth. But we might have a second opportunity in this. If Olsen does have a partner we haven't caught yet, then they're likely to be meeting to share information while Olsen is on the lam. We might have a chance to net both of them.'

'Very well done, Wind, Tropic.' Sally gave him back his pad. 'Get in touch with the locals and have them issue an APB. And let's get tight with border control. See if you can get a warrant for the security cameras at every crossing between here and the water-- who knows? We might get lucky and catch him when he heads back for Sanq.'

'I'll get on it.' Tropic nodded sharply to Zechs. 'Good job.'

Zechs clapped his partner on the shoulder. 'Let's find Olsen and close our case.'

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'So we're allowed to talk?' Duo asked him.

'On private time,' Zechs admitted. 'Nothing case-related. But I wanted to check in.'

'Just feeling cooped up.' There was a short, tight silence on the other phone. 'Choudhury is effing killing me. He poked into all our stuff.'

'He's sweeping--'

'I know how to perform a sweep. He's poking. Into our stuff. Rebeka is like nine million times better at everything.'

'Should I be jealous?' Zechs checked the clock on his mobile's display, and stifled a yawn. 'Please use code names, Duo. We have them for good reason.'

'Some reason, anyway.' Duo sighed. 'I'm not all that good at waiting. It's a character flaw. Distract me. Tell me Heero and the Princess are suffering every bit as much as me.'
'Quite probably.' The summer residence was hardly a hovel, but it was much smaller than the Palace, and their movements would probably be limited to just the enclosed garden, if Agent Ulv let them venture even that far. 'It won't be forever.'

'I know.'

'Duo?'

'Hold on.' There was background noise--Zechs couldn't be sure what it was. It went on and on, with a loud bang at one point and then more talking he couldn't understand. Then Duo's voice again. 'Wind,' he said, 'I have to go now. Neptune and I have to go.'

'All right,' he answered, a little mystified by that. 'I'll call again later.'

'It's not like I'm staring down at the street waiting to catch you, Wind.' There was more background noise, a voice, but too muffled to be intelligible. And then Duo hung up.

That was cryptic. Zechs thought at first they'd been merely disconnected, but the call was ended, one way or another. He rang back, but it went right to voicemail.

He was distracted by the trill of his desk phone. It was Mèo, calling from L4. Zechs offered a smile as he switched on video. 'Good to see you, Agent,' he greeted the other man. 'Although you look about as rested as I feel.'

'No rest for the weary,' Mèo replied, though he sounded rather more cheerful than Zechs could manage. 'So I understand you're my new boss.'

'From what I hear, you're in line to be taking charge yourself.' Zechs tilted his webcam in. 'I've reviewed the FreeSpace profile. I think we have a lot to go on here.'

'Agreed. I took the liberty of priming Mavise Winner on undercover protocols. She's shaken, but I think she'll hold over the long run.'

'Good. Excellent.'

'Her family are putting up some resistance, though. They want legal immunity for any criminal liability incurred during the operation--'

'Standard. We can agree to that.'

'Their lawyer's drawn up about a thousand forms. I'm having them scanned for you. Not much of a problem, but there is something that is. Quatre Winner is telling her not to do it.'

'Damn. How effective is he being?'

'There's a lot of crying together and holding of hands.' Mèo offered an uncertain shrug. 'Like I said, I think she'll hold, but we could stand to finesse her brother a little. That, boss, I leave to you.'

'I think I'm going to have to be there in person anyway.' He'd concluded that hours earlier, reading about FreeSpace and the situation on L4, but he was reluctant to admit to it. He'd handled multiple cases since coming on with Preventers, but never with such personal investment. 'We're dealing with an unrelated case here. I'll be able to be on a flight in perhaps two days. Maybe tomorrow. I won't stretch it.'

'With your permission I'll just keep working the protocols with Mavise, then. I don't think it hurts
our story at all for her to be in continued custody. We're monitoring all social media feeds for FreeSpace, and she's building some cachet in the community.'

'But the longer we hold her the longer we risk a leak. The Winner clan is anything but small.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Wind is plenty formal for me.'

'Then Wind it is. I look forward to working with you again.' Mèo inclined his head, and signed off.

Zechs tried to ring Duo again. Voicemail. He let the message play out, and said, 'Me again. Just wanting to let you know I have to leave town soon. I hate to do it now, but it can't really be avoided. Call me back, all right? I want to talk to you about it. It's--' He checked the clock. 'A little after nine. Call me when you can. Don't spend all night cooking for Neptune, even if she is your favourite.'

He made a short trip to the gym, but didn't have much energy for it. He confined himself to the bicycle for an hour, and took a longer shower than usual to pound out muscles sore from too much travel and tension. He checked his phone, before and after, but there was no message from Duo. Maybe Neptune was keeping him busy to distract him from his boredom. Wise of her.

He picked a lower bunk in the crib, and turned off the lights. It took some tossing to find the most comfortable angle, with springs from the thin mattress digging into his back. He finally stuffed the pillow under his chest and rested his head on his folded arms. He checked his phone one final time, and made sure the sound was on so Duo's call would wake him, whenever it came.

But when he woke six hours later, there were still no messages waiting.
'I can't believe I was so stupid,' he said rigidly. 'Incredibly stupid. How could I miss this?'

'Beat yourself up later,' Sally told him, clapping him on the shoulder. 'And tell me again what he said about--'

'He said he wasn't staring down at the street waiting to catch me.' Zechs glared grimly at the bloodstain on his carpet. The apartment was swarming with Preventers, but it felt still to Zechs, ominously empty. 'I thought at first he must mean a camera. He told me he set up Yuy's equipment. I assumed it meant just the computers. I missed that, too. But I don't think it was a new camera. I think he meant Heero's old camera. The one that captured a tall, blond man--'

'Zechs.' She drew him to the bedroom, the one space not currently overrun with his co-workers. Hydra, working in the connected bath, took one look at their Director and shut the door. 'Sit for a minute,' Sally told Zechs. 'Get your breath. Get your head on straight.'

He obeyed that. He sat on the edge of his bed, still neatly made the way Duo had left it. He wiped a spot of sweat from his temple, and inhaled deeply. 'I made a mistake,' he said. 'A very large and very bad mistake.'

'Yes.' Sally sat next to him. 'All right. Let's be honest. You did. But so did I. I shouldn't have thrown FreeSpace at you in the middle of this. And we all thought Olsen would turn around for Sanq and the Princess.'

'My fault, again. I'm the one who assumed it was Wing Zero in that image. I completely overlooked Deathscythe Hell.' He smoothed the crumpled printout he held-- an archived image of Duo's Gundam, bat-wings spread, glowing scythe raised. The outline matched almost perfectly with Olsen's drawings. 'The attacks have been aimed at both of them. All along. Why would I think--'

'Don't start second-guessing your logic. I was in agreement with you every step of the way.'

'I can't be your Deputy,' he admitted, bitter with himself. He'd always hated failure, but this was just so typical of the man he'd thought he'd left behind on Mars. A string of half-baked theories, the arrogant belief that he'd gone exactly as far as he needed to, and no farther. He never made mistakes in little things, no, not Zechs Merquise; Zechs Merquise only made the epic wrongs. There was blood on his carpet, Duo and a Preventer agent missing, and Zechs had let it go unreported for eight hours because he'd assumed he was on top of things.

'It won't look good,' Sally agreed. She sighed. 'But it's not a reason not to do it. In fact, I think it's the best reason yet for you to try. Preventers can't be everything to everybody. We need more people, we need more training, we need a central mission that's defined and narrowed, and we need agents who don't feel torn between conflicting cases. To get that, I need a deputy who really understands the problems we face. If you can get up the guts to admit to a mistake you made because you were tired, strung out, and overloaded, Zechs, I need you to do it in front of the Committee.'

There couldn't be another answer to that. Even if it resulted in a well-deserved censure. 'Yes,' he said. 'I can do it.'

'All right.' She knocked his shoulder. 'Now. Let's figure this out. Staring down at the street trying to
'catch you.'

With an effort he forced himself to concentrate solely on Duo's clues. 'Yuy had a camera. He was filming the street outside his old apartment. Neptune and I made him stop. After Yuy was deported, Duo collected all his equipment.'

Mamba knocked at the door, and came in when Sally gestured. 'Everything is encrypted,' he reported. 'We got into one of the laptops, but the big PCs--'

'Those are Heero's,' Zechs said.

'They're packing them up for the techs back at HQ. Hydra tried to get into one of them, and it went into a cascade lockdown. They're afraid it will fry the data at any unauthorised access attempts.'

'Gundam Pilots,' Sally muttered. 'God forbid it be easy. What about Duo's computer?'

'He has a bio-lock. They're easier to hack, apparently. Hydra says they can deal with it in Forensics, but there's nothing doing now. No immediate information.'

'So even if there is a camera, we can't view the upload for hours at best.' Zechs rose and walked to the window. He ran his fingers over the frame, but the team had already been over all of that, had already gone over his curtains and his corners. 'I didn't think Duo was that paranoid. Maybe I underestimated how much Heero's deportation affected him.'

'The terms of their parole bar both of them from purchasing any kind of obviously sensitive equipment,' Mamba pointed out. 'Security cameras should have tripped alarms. Especially anything high-tech enough to be hidden from a good sweep. Hydra didn't find anything when he was here during the protection detail.'

'Any word from Tropic?' Sally asked then.

'None,' Zechs said bitterly. 'Move that to the top of my list of blatant errors. Duo warned me about him.'

'Hey, there could be a good reason,' Mamba began.

Sally cut him off with a flat gesture. 'Not unless he's dead or dying,' she said. 'I personally left him a message demanding he check in. I don't know if I'm willing to believe he's the one who took Yuy's mail and called in the anonymous tip to get Yuy deported--'

'And drugged Duo and kidnapped a fellow agent, not to mention injured one of them,' Zechs added.

'I don't know if I'm willing to believe that entirely,' Sally repeated. 'But I admit I'm ready to sack him for disappearing without leave.' She waved Mamba out and moved to follow him, then turned back to Zechs. 'And before you get locked into blaming one of our own, Zechs, ask yourself what you're basing your theory on. Duo's suspicions aren't good enough.'

'He has a son,' Zechs said. 'And he recognised a Norsk word. He might speak the language.'

'Might? That's not good enough either.'

'What's his real name, Sally? Where is he from? How much of what you think you know about him is confirmed?'
'Director.' It was Cobra, hovering at the door with her partner. 'We just had a call from the Kalmar office,' she said gravely. 'Yuy's gone missing.'

'What?' Zechs demanded. 'What do you mean, missing?'

'He slipped out during the night. Disappeared from a locked and guarded room. They didn't even know he was gone until this morning. They crashed the house into lockdown, but he's gone.'

'What did Relena know?'

'She says nothing,' Cobra answered, and Zechs dismissed that with an angry shake of his head. There was no way Yuy would abandon her without telling her first-- not given the strength of his feelings for her. 'But,' Cobra added, 'she says she's not surprised. She said he got a call last night.'

'From—' Sally raised her eyebrows. 'From Maxwell?'

'That's what the Princess thinks. Yuy didn't say.'

'Find out the number and dump the phone,' Sally ordered. 'I want time and origin of that call. And discreetly put out an APB-- no-- don't do that. God. If he's found outside of Sanq, he'll be arrested again. Just dump the phone for now. Let's see if we can get a timeline out of this. It would tell us what direction they're headed in, anyway. Zechs, you're on point with that.'

He inclined his head. 'Yes, Director.'

'Let's go, people,' Sally said grimly. 'We need a win today.'

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'We've got the phone dumps,' Cobra said, leaning over Zechs to put a sheaf of paper on the table. Zechs had it in his hands before it hit the table. 'Maxwell's number isn't anywhere on this. And we did check for your number, too, Wind, but the only calls we had were the ones you'd already disclosed. If Maxwell called Yuy for help, there's no sign of it.'

'So what call did he get? The lists covered both the Malmö residence landline and the mobile Yuy had been given-- and, Zechs noted, it also covered the mobile Yuy had been known to have in Brussels. Smart. But the only one that had incoming calls was the landline. 'Who would even have known to call them there? There can't be more than a dozen or fifteen who know where Preventers have moved the Princess.'

'We started work on that.' Cobra pulled another sheet from her dossier. 'Two officers in the Sanq Preventers station, plus Orange and Spider. Presumably they had no reason not to stay mum.' She eyed him sideways, when Zechs pulled a face. He'd presumed that Tropic was trustworthy, too. 'At any rate there's no evidence they were leaks. Here's where it's harder to say. They staff at Malmö who opened the place might have guessed why, and if one of them let out even a casual say-so, it could spread. That's six people. Plus the staff who came with the Princess, which adds another two, plus the staff who packed for her and who know now that she's not at the palace in the capitol. We've requested all their possible phone numbers, but it takes time to run that down, and the Sanq office is swamped just dealing with the Princess.'

Zechs gave up the lists in defeat. 'It was a long shot. And, honestly, I'm not sure it ever made
sense, that Duo would try to reach Heero. Heero's too far away to help in an emergency. And he had time on the phone with me to pass a message, to scream, anything. He didn't. Your next step wouldn't be trying to call someone in another country, even if that someone is a Gundam Pilot.'

'It doesn't answer for how Yuy knew to go to him.'

'No, it doesn't.'

'They don't have a network here?' Cobra sat next to him slowly. Softly, she said, 'If you tell me anything they're doing illegally, it won't go farther than the two of us. Right now all we want is enough information to find Maxwell and Neptune.'

Zechs scrubbed at his stubbled cheeks, deciding he'd earned that. 'Right now, if I knew anything, I would tell you. But I don't. As far as I know, they never breached the terms of their parole in any significant way. I know Yuy was in contact with the other Pilots in the colonies, or at least with Quatre Winner, but they can't even enter Earth-space without facing an extradition order. As for a network in Brussels-- not that I ever saw. The only people they had contact with were local services and a few acquaintances who've all checked out.'

She sighed. 'So another penny for the wishing well. You know, sometimes I wish people didn't live so quietly. Then at least we'd have clues.'

Mamba arrived, knocking on the side of Zechs' cubicle. 'We were able to get Tropic's file. I'm running down a few confirmations, but so far it looks like a cover. He came in early from the Johannesburg group and we didn't have the same level of scrutiny in those days. It looks like they did a casual sweep on his background check and didn't follow up on the irregularities.'

'What irregularities?'

Mamba took the space that they shifted to give him, and laid out the folder. It was a blue-covered, two-sided employment form, with the usual paperwork, but Mamba had been flagging items, and now it bristled with sticky notes. 'Like the fact that a man with his name disappeared in action, in April 195, from his unit in Order of the Zodiac.'

'He was in OZ?' That surprised Zechs. Then made him wary. His had been a well-known face and a well-known name. If Tropic had been in OZ, then Tropic would have known him. But had never said anything, nor ever betrayed any hints that he knew.

'Maybe he was, and maybe he wasn't. Because the man with his name who disappeared didn't turn up again until Tropic joined the Johannesburg unit, in early 197.'

'A cover story. Stealing an identity from someone assumed dead, who can never contradict you.'

'It's at least a possibility. It's been known to happen. Just not usually within Preventers.'

'They would have fingerprinted--' Cobra turned the page to light of Zechs' desk lamp. 'Ferrins Meijer for the military. If Tropic isn't Ferrins Meijer, there's forensic proof.'

Mamba shrugged, and took Tropic's chair. 'OZ wiped out zettabytes of data held by Alliance servers during the coup. And even if they did save any of it, their own servers got wiped after Libra.'

'Heero Yuy could probably tell us that. He's the one who was always looking for secret information.' Zechs rubbed his eyes. 'Any mention in that file of family?'
A couple of old girlfriends. I rang all three, and they all claim to not have heard from him in years.'

'But not a son.' Zechs turned to his computer. Árni Olsen's birth certificate only lists his mother, Bara. But Pargan told me that Olsen had lived with his father for at least a span. But not recently enough to trigger any obvious lies in his background check. Tropic sat in that chair and told me he had to take care of something his son had done that was “disappointing”. The timeline fits. That's the time Olsen murdered Pargan. Tropic went to Sanq to help him cover it up.'

'Assuming that's correct, assuming Olsen is his son, then why's he disappeared now?'

'Because he's in on it,' Cobra said. 'He would have to be. It goes with Maxwell's report that there was a blond man watching his flat. It goes with someone calling Immigration when there were no Preventers here in Brussels to stop it. It even goes with drugging Maxwell that night. Tropic had to be the one doing it.'

'Olsen got caught early trying to reach Relena,' Mamba speculated. 'And then, perhaps, Pargan started to figure things out, so Olsen killed him. And when we started to close in on the truth, Tropic went AWOL. To do what, though?'

'To get to Maxwell while he was vulnerable.' Zechs felt a sinking sensation open in his stomach, and grabbed for his water to fill it. 'That's what Duo meant. He said, “It's not like I'm staring down at the street waiting to catch you”. He was telling me about Tropic-- because Tropic was on Heero's video tape. And he used our code names. He never uses our code names. It all adds up to identifying a Preventer.'

That was worth a moment of silence between the agents. Cobra broke it. 'Any luck searching for Olsen's parents?'

'Nothing. We already knew the mother had died. A few years before the war. Olsen lived with his grandfather from that time forward. But all we have about the father is the given name, Latham. It's not enough to go on.'

'So we're back where we started,' Mamba grumped. 'A fat lot of unknown.'

The phone on Zechs' desk rang, and they all jumped. They'd been tired to begin it and there wasn't any good rest coming, Zechs thought guiltily. He grabbed for the receiver and stuck it into the crook of his neck. 'Wind.'

'This is Ulv in Sanq. I have news for you.'

Zechs waved for the others just as they were rising to leave. 'I'm putting you on speaker, Ulv.' He punched the button and hung up the receiver. 'Go ahead. Agents Mamba and Cobra are with me.'

Ulv wasted no time on polite greetings. 'We missed something,' she said bluntly. 'I'll make my report to the Director after this. We had a call from an informant, but we missed it-- we put him off and didn't check into it when we ought to have.'

Zechs tapped impatiently on the desktop. 'It happens,' he admitted. 'And it's been going around with this case. But what did the informant say? Who was it?'

'A young man named Troyes Lefèvre. He's a known associate of the Princess, but we assumed at the time of his contact that he was simply trying to get information from us, not the reverse. We've had dozens of calls from people who've heard she's left the Palace abruptly, cancelled events. It's still a twitchy place, when it involves the Princess. We all remember the Barton Rebellion.' At Zechs' inhale, she got to the point. 'Lefèvre claimed to have been contacted by Duo Maxwell.'
'What?’ Mamba was suddenly crowding his shoulder, but Zechs ignored it as he grabbed for paper and pencil. 'How did Maxwell reach him? When?'

'Unknown at this time. My man who spoke with Lefèvre didn't follow up on it, for which I'll string him up by the thumbs. Maxwell apparently told Lefèvre that they were stranded in unknown countryside. Lefèvre supplied the number, and we ran it down an hour ago. It's from one of your company cars.'

Zechs was already writing. 'Registration?'

'State-supplied is KAZ-937. Fleet number 4-HHI-272.'

Cobra grabbed the keyboard of Zechs' computer to pull up their internal databases. She typed the numbers quickly. 'It wasn't officially checked out for use. I'll get an APB out, and get a tracker on the car's GPS.' She left immediately, and her partner ducked after to follow.

'Tropic had to transport them somehow. But he wouldn't stay in a Preventers' vehicle, knowing we can trace it.' Zechs tapped his pencil on his knee. 'Lefèvre didn't say anything else?’

'No. And we can't reach him now. He'd been staying as a guest in the palace here, and staff say he's gone. We've tried his home residence in France, but it appears to be closed for the season.'

'Why would Maxwell contact Lefèvre? Why not try to reach Preventers?'

'I wish I could be of more help.'

So did Zechs. He didn't say it aloud, however. 'The Princess is still secure?'

'I have every available agent on her. That's why I've only got rookies left in the office to answer the phones. It's a hell of a situation, Wind. Pants down and arse to the winter, here.'

'We can only do the best we can.' Zechs caught his hair in a tail, and released it with a slow, calming breath. 'Thank you for the information. It's more than we had a minute ago.'

'Best of luck, Agent.'

'And to you.’ Zechs abandoned his desk as soon as he'd hung up. Mamba was in his cubicle when Zechs passed it, on the phone himself and simultaneously at work on their GPS tracking software, trying to locate the vehicle. Zechs prowled the small stretch of carpet just outside it, cracking his knuckles, trying to shake out the kinks in a sore neck.

Cobra finished her task first. 'The locals are alerted to the car. But if they are in countryside, it's going to be hard to find.'

'They've had eleven hours to drive. They could be anywhere in Europe by now.'

'At least we know who contacted Heero Yuy. It must have been Lefèvre. We overlooked the number because he's always in contact with the Princess.'

'We overlooked it,' Zechs echoed. He touched her arm. 'We might have overlooked Lefèvre entirely. He's wealthy. And wealthy people own private transport. He could have got Yuy back onto the continent.'

'I'll get to work on it,' she said promptly. 'Private or not, any vehicle he owns will be registered. We'll search for those too.'
'Check for private planes as well. Anything he has access to.'

Mamba beckoned him in. Zechs planted a hand on the desktop, bending to read the small green print on the screen of Mamba's computer. 'GPS in the vehicle still says it's in Brussels. On the street outside Maxwell's flat.'

'He ripped it out.' Zechs fell back into the spare chair, trying not to be disappointed. 'Of course he would think of it. He knows how we track the fleet.'

'Do we assume at this point that Olsen's met up with Tropic?'

'We haven't had any other sightings. We don't have any evidence to support it, but I think yes.'

'I've been running another query. Trying to track down any Lathams from the right period.' Mamba raised the window on his computer screen. 'I did run across one that's interesting. We have a Latham who turned up on an old Alliance watch list.'

'A watch list? Who were they watching?' Zechs sat forward again. 'How'd you even find the list?'

'It was leaked to the internet a decade ago. I turned up a few versions of it, so authenticity might be questionable, but at this point we're open to guesswork, I should think. Here's the entry. Latham Ohlsen.'

'Different spelling. Why did he turn up?'

'As a radical Pacifist. Alliance were watching university students. He's listed as a possible member of a group that supported total disarmament and universal government.'

'The kind of person who might be expected to ecstatically support Relena, and fanatically protect her from corrupting influences like Gundam Pilots.'

Mamba inclined his head. 'But square that with joining Preventers? We're the only official exception to disarmament.'

'Fight the power from the inside?' It didn't seem to jive, true. 'And you can argue that while none of the attacks against the Pilots were overtly violent, they certainly caused harm. Radical Pacifism doesn't allow for any aggression.'

'Assuming he's not just a kook who thinks one thing and does another. You can never account for crazy.'

'No. That's true.' Milliardo Peacecraft had espoused Pacifism, after all, and still turned to White Fang. Zechs rubbed his neck, and shook his head. 'Even if that Latham is Tropic, I'd say Árni Olsen doesn't share his father's beliefs. Those drawings of his and murdering his grandfather don't bode well for Neptune and Maxwell.'

'Well, from where I sit, that leaves us with one option.' Mamba slapped his knees and stood. 'We catch the sons of bitches and ask them.'

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In the end, however, they didn't do much catching.
Sally announced it over the PA at twenty-six hours past the kidnapping. 'Attention,' she called, and Zechs looked up in the act of sorting results on radical pacifists. 'We've had contact with Agent Neptune. We have a location, and we're sending a car to pick them up now.'

Zechs went running. His fellow agents weren't far behind him. He ignored the lifts and just took the stairs, two at a time, banged open the firedoor and up the hall to Sally's office. 'What?' he demanded.

Sally nodded to her phone. 'I had a call from Neptune. She said that she and Maxwell are injured but that they're alone, now, and safe, and that they've found shelter. A local family.'

'Where?'

'Almost to Dresden.'

'Germany?' His first reaction was disbelief. To have gone so far. And then he felt relief-- and then disbelief again. 'What was the point of that? Where the hell were they going? Just driving until-- what?'

'Unknown, and it might stay that way.' Sally shook her head grimly. 'Árni Olsen is dead.'

Zechs gripped the back of the nearest chair, trying to imagine that. 'Which of them killed him.'

Sally hesitated now. 'Duo.'

'His parole.'

'I know. But from what Neptune says, there was no other choice. It was unquestionably self-defence.' She pushed it off by straightening her shoulders. 'We'll deal with that when it comes. For right now, we pick up our people and get them safe back at home.'

'I'm going,' Zechs said.

'No argument. Meet up with them on the border.'

'It's going to take six hours for them to get there!'

'That we will argue about, Zechs. You go as far as the border. We've still got problems with this case, Heero Yuy is still out there running around, and I haven't heard that we've answered the question of where Troyes Lefèvre fits in. Not to mention your partner.'

'You mean--' That paused him. 'He wasn't with his son?'

'He was. But he's fled. And that means we have a Preventer who's AWOL and an accessory. We need to bring him in. And I need you close enough to participate in that.'

It galled, but he couldn't argue with the logic. 'Agreed.'

But six hours later, Zechs sat in his car with Hydra, gripping his wheel so tightly his fingers were numbing, no closer to locating Tropic than before. There was no way of knowing which country Tropic was in, now-- if he'd made it across the border to Germany, the smartest thing he could do would be to keep running. And if he'd already adopted a fake identity once, it was more than possible for him to do it again.

'That's them,' Hydra said, showing Zechs the text on his phone. 'The German agents will pull off to meet us. We'll make the switch and they'll head home.'
Zechs nodded, the most he could manage. He already knew the tally of hurts suffered; the German agents had forwarded plenty of information. Neptune had a concussion-- they'd knocked her out to get her out of Duo's flat. Duo had a broken arm, minor lacerations. It was a relatively light escape, all told, but seeing it would be worse than hearing about it, and Zechs already felt he could cheerfully wring Tropic's neck with bare hands.

He saw headlights against the setting sun, rising over a hill. Zechs flashed his own lights, from the service station road, and the car headed toward them left the carriageway and took the loop around. Zechs opened his door and stood out on the pavement.

The car slowed approaching them, and pulled to a stop perhaps fifteen feet away. The agents stepped out first, both from the front of the car. One came toward Zechs while the other stepped to the back, opening the door. Neptune. The agent helped her rise, provided an arm for her to lean on. But Zechs barely had eyes for her. Duo was coming out the other side.

He had a large coat draped over him, a scarf wrapped loosely around his neck. And he was looking for Zechs-- his eyes roamed, and then found him. They stared at each other for a long solemn moment. Then Duo walked around the car, and took Neptune's side. The agent let them approach unaided.

'You're Wind?'

'Yes.' Zechs belatedly extended a hand to the agent in front of him. 'Agent Hida.'

'They're battered, but they're alive. We stopped for food on the way, but they'll need something hot in them soon. We've got a file started, which we'll transfer to your office, of course. We found the vehicle. We'll return that too.'

'Appreciated. Please—excuse me. Hydra, wrap up any details with them, please.' Zechs took five steps, to meet his friends as they neared. It took all the restraint in him to offer Neptune his hand first. She pressed it gently. 'Let's get you in the car,' he told her. 'Hospital for you.'

'Normally I'd groan, but if they let me lay flat, I don't care,' she replied. Her smile was strained. 'I'm ready to debrief.'

'Don't worry about it until we're sure you're all right.'

'He did well,' Neptune said then. 'Duo. And he saved my life. I want that on the record.'

He'd never been more grateful to her. 'That will help,' he said quietly. 'Thank you.'

She nodded once. Her hand slipped from Duo's shoulder, and she walked the rest of the way to the car on her own. Hydra helped her in.

Zechs drew a deep breath. He reached for Duo's coat, tugged it open. He had one arm in a sling. There was a darkening bruise on his chest, revealed by the vee collar of his shirt, and a stitched cut on his temple as well.

Duo let him inventory each wound, but his eyes were waiting when Zechs looked again. He said only, 'I'm okay.'

Zechs had to clear his throat. 'Good,' he said huskily.

'I want to go home.' Duo shrugged his coat closed. 'That's not possible right now, is it.'
'I'm afraid not. I really wish that it were.'

Duo nodded to himself. He gathered himself up, and it tugged at Zechs to see how weary he was, to see the new closed and shuttered look to his face. But he walked for the car. Zechs followed him, and held the door for him. He shut it only when Duo was seated, his head falling back to rest.

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'I was on the phone with Agent Wind.' Duo picked at a dent in the table, scraping it with the edge of his nail. There was a knock. Identified himself as Tropic. Neptune let him in. There was no reason not to assume it was official business. At first I think he tried to convince her to hand me off. When she protested, I noticed it was happening. So he pulled a weapon on us. Me, actually. He said he didn't want things to be violent but if we pushed him, it would be. He told me to act normal, to hang up the phone with Agent Wind, to not pass any clues or make a sound out of turn. Of course I did it anyway.'

And Zechs hadn't even noticed. He clenched his jaw, but he didn't speak. He was an observer only, at the moment, and his failure was already well recorded.

'Tropic didn't like that. He said he'd find a place to put a hole in me that would stop me speaking at all, if I did it again. I told him he could fuck me and his mother, too, and I knew he was dirty and I'd already told his partner. I told him he was already under investigation and he wouldn't make it out of the fucking building. Then Neptune tried to hit him on the head with my lamp.' Duo picked at the table. 'My favourite lamp. As it happens. They struggled, and he clocked her with his gun. I took my turn at it, and he broke my fucking arm. And then he told me he'd shoot Neptune if I didn't back down. It went like that for hours, pretty much. Using us against each other. Sucks that it works.'

Cobra smiled briefly, in sympathy. 'It usually does. What happened next?'

Duo dragged his fingers through his hair, and fell back in his seat with a sigh. 'Neptune was out hard. He made me get her down the stairs. We went out the back, through the garden. He had a car. He made me put her in the trunk and then told me to climb in after her. I did it. He closed the lid. I looked for the emergency trunk release, but he'd cut it out. I tried to kick down the backseat, too, but that was a no-go. With both of us in the trunk I didn't have room to try the brake lights, but I did manage the pull the wires and short-circuit all the signals. Figured maybe we'd get pulled over.' He shrugged jaggedly. 'But we didn't. So he drove. For a long time. We stopped at some point, I think about three hours. Neptune was in and out by then, but the trunk was pretty cramped and we didn't have a lot of spare oxygen floating around. Anyway I figured that when we stopped, he switched with the kid. Pargan's grandson. I never saw the guy again.'

That was interesting. They'd known that Tropic hadn't been with his victims all the way to the end, but Zechs would take Duo's internal clock as fact any day. He gestured for Hydra. 'Map,' he said. 'We can at least figure out a range based on their final destination and the three hour mark.'

'On it.'

'So we keep driving. I could tell when we were totally out of city bounds-- they don't repair the roads as much out in the country. If we were in the country, it meant he was going to waste us. You don't dump in your own yard; you find somewhere quiet out in cow country. When he finally
stopped the car we were in some kind of forest. Woods, I guess, properly; it wasn't that far from civilisation, but enough to cover any casual noise. Kid pops the trunk. He's got the gun now. It wasn't Preventers' issue, by the way. You might be able to track it if you trace it back to Agent Tropic. He wants me out first. The kid. He's frothing at the mouth practically. He starts this screed about how I personally have fucked up the world. The whole of history. And that it's not enough that I came here to kill, but now I wanted Relena Peacecraft to turn from her path. Most of it was the same noise you get on the net or whatever. But that stood out to me. Turning her from her path.'

Cobra let him sit quietly for a moment before prodding him. 'What happened then?'

'Then I hit him in the face and broke his nose.' Duo stirred, to sit forward now, to drop his chin onto his hand. 'We wrestled for the gun. He fired a few times. Hit the car. Sorry about that-- it got pretty beat up in this--' Duo's lips twisted to the side. 'Thing. So Neptune is in the car. So we're wrestling for the gun. With my arm broke, I'm not so great at wrestling, so he wins. He says I did this to myself. He shoots at the trunk. So I grabbed a rock and I hit. I hit him until he stopped moving, and then I took the gun. Neptune was okay, but-- I didn't take the time to think about it. I just got her out and into the front seat. We drove. It was dark and I'd shorted all the fucking lights so I couldn't see for shit. We hit some kind of dike, I think, and the car wouldn't restart... It's kind of a blur. Neptune said we had to keep moving. We left the car and we went out on foot. We thrashed around out there for maybe forty minutes before we saw lights. One of those old farmhouses. There was a family, and they let us in, use the phone. That's pretty much the end of it.'

'Well, not quite.' Cobra turned her file toward Duo. 'This is a transcript of a call that was made by Troyes Lefèvre to Preventers' Hotline. Claiming he spoke to you.'

'Yeah.' Zechs looked up from the map, some instinct catching on that. There was nothing any different in Duo's slump, but there was just the tiniest change in his voice. 'That sonnovabitch Tropic took my phone and I was shaken. I couldn't remember any numbers. I called Troyes because I had his card in my shirt from the last time I wore it. I asked him to call Preventers. The family we'd found, they were taking care of Neptune, and when she woke up she gave me Sally's number to try.'

'Were you aware that Troyes Lefèvre contracted Heero Yuy?'

'Heero? Why?'

'Maybe you know why?''

'Nothing obvious is leaping at me.' Duo's confusion seemed real-- but somehow Zechs was sure that seemed was the operative word.

'Heero is missing,' Cobra said. 'Did you know that?'

'Are you accusing me of something? How the hell would I know what the fuck Heero's doing? I was in a fucking car trunk for most of the fucking day!' Duo shoved to his feet. 'I'm tired and I want to go home. Are we done?'

Sally, standing at the window, gave her nod. Cobra rose as well. 'We're all glad you're all right,' she told Duo. 'Truly.'

'Yeah.' Duo hunched his shoulders. 'Thanks. But I really do want to just go home.'

'We're putting Preventers back on watch,' Sally told him. 'Until we have Tropic in custody.'
'Okay. Thanks.'

Zechs clapped Hydra on the back. 'I'll drive,' he told Duo. 'Let's go.'

'Zechs.' Sally stopped him. Duo slowed, with Cobra behind him, and Zechs nodded his assurance that it was all right. The door closed behind them. 'They haven't found Olsen's body,' Sally told him. 'They're pausing the search until they have daylight.'

'Duo wasn't able to pinpoint a location.'

'No, but the woods aren't that big. We'll keep looking.'

Zechs wet his lips. 'If there's no body, there's no proof of death.'

'Meaning no proof Duo assaulted and killed someone.'

'In self-defence. And Neptune backed up his story.'

'Then we'll hope that's enough,' Sally said. 'But we have to file on it. And that means it will go up against his terms of parole.'

'We can't sit on it? Even for a day or two?'

'Maybe twenty-four hours,' Sally said reluctantly. 'But we won't get away with more than that.'

'Then we'll hope,' Zechs echoed, and left her.

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For a long time, they just lay together in their bed. Duo curled toward the wall, and Zechs lay behind him, stroking his splinted arm, his hair. Several times he began to speak, but stopped himself. He wanted Duo to get there in his own time.

It was nearly three in the morning when Duo inhaled deeply, and rolled to face him. He said, 'I know we have to talk about it, but I don't want to.'

Zechs bit his bottom lip and let it go. 'All right.'

'Thanks.'

He kissed Duo's chin. 'Do you want to sleep?'

'No.' Duo touched him, his fingertip dragging down Zechs' ribs one by one. 'I really like Rebeka. We should marry her. It can be a double wedding thing, and we'll wear twin tuxedos. That's legal, right?'

'Somewhere, I'm sure.' It took effort not to touch Duo's bruises, now purpling like orchids, but he restrained himself. 'She likes you. She says you saved her life.'

'I don't want to talk about it, Zechs.' Duo sat up, to set the alarm. 'You need to be in by six?'

'Seven. Don't worry about it. One more night without sleep isn't going to make a difference at this
point.'

'They're working you too hard. Aren't there labour laws?'

'Duo.' He propped himself up to kiss Duo's mouth. 'Why don't you take a hot bath. I'll bring a glass of wine and make you breakfast.'

'Sounds good.' Duo caressed his throat, and Zechs pretended not to notice that Duo's fingers trembled. 'Hey, I know this is going to be weird, but do you kind of mind, like, um--'

'Fucking the sad out of you.'

Duo smiled involuntarily. 'I think that's the dirtiest thing you've ever said.'

'I've been hanging around with you for a long time now.' He kissed Duo, deeply, pressing him back to the pillows. 'I was scared for you,' he whispered. 'I don't mind reaffirming how much I love you by physical demonstration.'

'Good call.' Duo hooked a leg over Zechs' thigh. 'It's not weird? It feels like it might be.'

'Maybe if we make a habit of it. I think we can let one go.'

Duo squeezed him by the buttocks, but then his hand slid north, to settle on the small of Zechs' back. 'I was scared. Also. Bad things happen. It doesn't normally bother me so much. But it was always just me, before. Or me and Heero, but even if we are weirdly close I promise we never did it, unless you count the weird shower incident, which I totally don't. Unless I'm super lonely and drunk.'

Zechs buried a grin in Duo's shoulder. 'I thought I was going to be making you feel better. Not the other way round.'

'I don't know. I think I felt better when I saw you on the border.' Duo squirmed under him, to shuck his sling, hurl it into the darkness of their bedroom. He propped his cast behind his head. The other hand traced a languid path up Zechs' spine. 'And whatever that German medic gave Rebeka on the way home made her pretty horny. She whispered a lot of sweet nothings in my ear the whole way up. I'm serious about that three-way.'

'I'm sure.' He hugged Duo's thigh to his. 'Without talking about it-- I do want to say that all I could think was that I have nothing here without you.'

'Zechs.' Duo kissed him. 'That's so gay.'

He couldn't help his laugh. 'Duo.'

'I love you, too.' Duo fingered his hair back from his temple. 'I really do. It's pretty amazing.'

'Yes. It is.'
'There's no body out there,' Sally said. 'They've had dogs on the area for hours and people beating the bush from the ground. Either Árni Olsen isn't really dead, or something magical happened to his body.'

'Maybe he's not dead,' Cobra offered. 'Maxwell said he just hit until Olsen stopped fighting him. He might have thought Olsen was dead, but it was a pretty chaotic scene. He thought he'd killed the bugger, and he ran. Meanwhile, Olsen wakes up, drags himself off to safety.'

'Did they turn up blood?' Zechs asked. 'Forensic evidence? Duo said he used a rock. There would be tyre tracks.'

'They have a likely site. They're on it now. We have their word they'll forward all the evidence collected.'

'So what are you saying?' Mamba asked curiously. 'That the stories aren't meeting up with reality?'

Sally didn't answer that immediately. She planted both hands on her desk, staring down at it grimly.

'You don't want to impugn one of your own agents,' Zechs guessed. He dropped his head to rest on the chair rail behind him. 'Neptune's story matches Duo's.'

'Maybe a little too closely.' Sally blew out a slow breath. 'She claims to have been in and out of consciousness. She heard shouting, raised her head, saw Duo fighting with Olsen. Saw him hit Olsen and, she says, apparently kill him. Duo helped her out of the trunk, drove them for a while. Found a farm with a family who helped them. She was out for at least a few hours after they found the farm, but when she woke, she remembered my number, and they contacted me.'

'Does she remember Duo calling Troyes Lefèvre?' Cobra questioned.

'She says she was aware of Duo calling someone for help, but he didn't know if it had helped. She said he was frustrated and afraid on her behalf. That he seemed shaken and didn't know what to do.' Sally raised her head, and Zechs became aware she was looking at him, now. 'And, honestly, that's where I find myself asking questions. Granted, I don't know Duo as well as you do, but I don't think there's anyone on the planet who's ever seen Duo Maxwell at a loss for what to do.'

'That's not fair, Sally.' Zechs sat forward to tap on her desk. 'That isn't fair. See it from his perspective. He'd been locked in a trunk with an agent he likes and respects, and he was worried for her safety, being forced over and over again to choose her safety, her life over trying to call for help, to make a scene that might have got them caught before it was so dire. After hours of that Olsen brings him out at gunpoint, and attacks him for his actions in the war. You do know him well enough to know he feels strongly about it, and that he's suffered for his choices, to the point of living practically under house arrest in Brussels for years because he wouldn't disavow what he'd done as a Gundam Pilot. Add in fighting Olsen for his life and Neptune's life, and consider this-- he knew as well as we did that when he hit Olsen hard enough to kill him that he was probably going to lose his freedom again just for defending himself. I think that's enough stress to make a man forget a few details.'

Cobra was nodding. Mamba wasn't. Mamba was pursing his lips, and his eyes dipped away when Zechs looked at him. So did Sally.
'You can't tell me that being a Gundam Pilot didn't train him and prepare him for stressful situations,' Sally said finally. 'Or that killing one man who deserved it was so earth-shattering to him that he lost his head. Even for a few minutes. He's lying, Zechs.'

Zechs stood. 'Where's the proof? Are we going to go to court on that, that he's a Gundam Pilot and that should answer for all sins?'

'That isn't what I'm saying.'

'I think it is. I think it is, that you really think that. He isn't a Gundam Pilot-- he was a Gundam Pilot, five years ago. When he was fifteen years old, Sally, let's just remember that, too, and that since that time the most danger he's faced is a rusty engine in a mechanic's garage.'

'Zechs—'

'What about Neptune?' Cobra interrupted. 'If you think Maxwell's lying, then we have to assume Neptune's lying, too.'

'So we're going to just accuse an agent wounded in action of breaking her oath and covering up crimes?' Zechs pointed out. 'All because you can't believe Duo's too capable not to murder someone.'

'That's enough, Agent.' Sally crossed her arms. 'We're not assuming anything. But we will keep looking for proof. That's our job. And no, we are not accusing Neptune of anything-- but I want her re-interviewed. There's holes in the story, and it's our job to find out why. And may I just point out, if we can cut across the self-righteousness in the room, that the reason we're all standing here is that an agent did break his oath, did cover up crimes, and is still at large? Find your damn partner, Merquise, and then talk to me about what we can and can't assume.'

'If those are your orders, Commander,' Zechs said coldly, and didn't wait for her answer. He didn't slam the door on his way out, but his hands itched to do it. He strode hard for the stairwell, and pushed his way in.

'Wind, wait.' The door opened again above him, and Zechs slowed his descent. It was Cobra.

'What,' he asked her shortly.

Cobra skipped down the steps quickly to join him near the landing. 'I'm with you,' she said simply. Zechs forced himself to relax, and nodded tightly. 'Now let's go prove it.'

He gripped her arm. 'Thank you.'

'I won't let it be a witch hunt.' She gestured, and they climbed down the steps together. 'I've seen it before,' Cobra added then. 'I've seen it before, Commander.'

'Zechs lifted his hair from his neck, trying to cool himself from his fit of temper. It was already leaving him; he was too tired to sustain it. And apparently too tired to sustain civility. They all were. It wasn't like Sally to issue ultimatums, but both of them behaving badly was still a problem, and if he didn't rein himself in, it might become entrenched. He could only help Duo if he kept a cool head and brought Sally actionable proof.

'Seen it before?' he asked then. 'A case you worked?'

'My brother.' Cobra pulled at a chain under her shirt, and lifted it to the light. Hand-fashioned dog tags, a bit of polished tin with a name stamped in uneven letters. 'He was pulled into the Provincial
Army, during the war. He was thirteen. When the war ended and the Army was disbanded, there was a rash of murders. Collaborators being targeted. Someone from our town gave up Kwanele. He was lynched.'

Zechs touched her arm again. 'I'm sorry. There are too many stories like that.'

She nodded. Her fingers rubbed the edges of the dog tags, a gesture Zechs thought he remembered from chance glances at her, when she sat alone at her desk or was lost in her thoughts at meetings. He stopped walking, and held her wrist until she stopped, as well. He cupped her shoulders, waiting for her nod. He embraced her gently.

It took a moment, but she brought her hands up tentatively to rest on his back. 'Thank you,' she said, subdued.

'Thank you. For telling me. And for helping Duo now.' He released her quickly. 'For understanding what's at stake. I'm not sure I did, until this. Wars never really end, do they.'

'That's what Preventers are here for. So we'll do our job, and do it right. Duo will be all right.'

He wasn't sure yet that he believed it. But he nodded, himself, and they went down the stairs together.

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'I woke up in the boot,' Neptune told them. 'There wasn't really room for both of us. Duo was-- I don't even know how he had the presence of mind. He's a good person. He'd worked his way under me, so my head could rest on his chest. To cushion me against bumps, because of this.' She waved a hand at the brilliantly bruised wound on her temple, now bandaged in bright white gauze. 'He told me everything. I think he had to repeat it a dozen times, whenever I woke up. He just kept saying we needed to be calm, that we'd have our chance to do something if we just waited it out. Nothing like being reassured by a pocket-sized teenager.' She smiled wearily at Zechs.

'Tell us about the confrontation with Olsen,' Mamba said. He was working the recorder, and taking notes as well. Unconsciously-- mostly unconsciously-- Zechs and Cobra had arrayed themselves against Mamba, taking the right of Neptune's gurney while Mamba was stranded alone on the left. He was stiff, pretending not to notice it, but Zechs refused to feel badly about it. If Mamba came around on his own, that was good; if he didn't, they'd have to work without him, and Zechs was prepared to cut his losses.

Neptune grimaced at her water cup, and pushed it away with a finger. 'I don't suppose one of you could jail-break me for a coffee.'

'No stimulants until you're cleared,' Zechs reminded her. 'But the minute you are, I'll bury you in chocolate and caffeine.'

Her grin had a bit more cheek in it, then. 'I'll hold you to that.'

'Olsen,' Mamba reminded her.

'The car stopped moving at some point. I wasn't really awake at first. He made Duo climb out; I was aware of that, but all the jostling-- I was sick.' She shook her head at her own remembered
weakness. 'Duo tried to help me, and Olsen told him to leave me and move away from the car. There was a lot of shouting. Olsen wasn't incredibly coherent; a lot of snarling and screaming. He was demented,' she said flatly. 'He's-- was obviously obsessed with Relena Peacecraft. Most of his ranting had to do with her. That the Gundam Pilots had corrupted her. That they'd ruined the one pure thing on the planet. He kept repeating himself-- You're evil. You're evil. I was trying to climb out of the trunk, and I think Olsen saw me. He was facing away until then, but he started to turn. That's when Duo hit him. He has a mean right hook. Olsen keeled over, and Duo fought him for the gun. Olsen started firing at random, or I think at random. He was pinging the car, so I ducked back down in the boot. The shooting stopped. Olsen started his rant again, but he was cut off. When I looked, Duo was on top of him, hitting him with a rock. Three times, maybe, or maybe four, I'm not entirely sure. But Olsen was down and he wasn't moving. Duo came running for me. He got me out of the boot and into the passenger seat. He just started driving.'

Mamba nodded over his notes. 'And when did you ditch the car?'

'I'm not sure how long we drove, but we were off the road, and without lights we couldn't find it. Maybe half an hour? It doesn't feel real.' Neptune touched her bandage, and sighed. 'I don't know. It felt like forever, and it also felt like I blinked and it was over.'

'So once you left the car, you found the farm.'

'Not right away. We hit something, hard enough to blow the airbags. The car alarm went off. Duo managed to cut it, yanked the wires right out of the dash. He asked me if I could walk, and I said I wasn't sure. He tried the car phone. He said he knew someone who might be able to help us. I don't remember the name, but he said a friend. Someone who could be trusted.'

'Why not try the police? Or the Preventers' Hot Line?'

'Neither of us knew the local emergency code. The Hot Line-- I--' She shook her head in frustration. 'Honest to God, I didn't think of it, and I guess he didn't either. It just never occurred to me. No-one ever warned me a head wound turns you into an idiot.'

It was plausible. It might even have been true. But Zechs doubted it. Sally was right. Neptune's story was just a little too close to Duo's. There was a little too much detail, too much-- correctness. She'd even gotten chronology right, and it just sounded a little too much like a memorised narrative, even for an agent whose job was to present the facts that way. But she'd included the note about Troyes Lefèvre without prompting. Duo hadn't.

'Heero Yuy is missing,' Zechs told her. 'Apparently Troyes Lefèvre called him. And Yuy took that as a signal to leave Sanq. We haven't been able to track his movements.'

'Leave Sanq? Wouldn't that break the terms of his asylum?''

'As much as Duo killing Olsen would break the terms of his.'

'But Sanq isn't going to throw Heero Yuy in jail,' Mamba said. 'Brussels will leap at the chance to put Maxwell back behind bars.'

'Only if we find Olsen's body,' Cobra disagreed. 'Without a body, even if Maxwell thinks he killed Olsen, there's not enough to revoke his parole.'

'You haven't found Olsen?' Neptune interrupted. 'How?'

Zechs answered when the other two stayed silent. 'Unknown. The German branch of Preventers say they found the trail, but no Olsen.'
'What about Tropic? Maybe he followed us after all. I meant to ask about that-- what's the connection between Tropic and Arni Olsen?'

Mamba reluctantly supplied it. 'We believe Tropic is his father. It looks like Tropic stole the identity of a soldier who went MIA in the war. Nothing conclusive, but circumstantially it looks like Olsen is his son from his previous life, and that, possibly at least, Tropic managed to indoctrinate Olsen with all this nonsense about the Pilots corrupting Pacificism's greatest leader.'

Neptune shook her head. 'Enough crazy to go around and then some. I wondered. He didn't say anything to us, Tropic. Just wanted me to hand over Duo to him. He said the why didn't matter to me.'

'But maybe there's something to that,' Zechs mused. 'If he's really the driving force behind this entire debacle. He's the one who intellectualises the “threat” posed by the Pilots to Relena Peacecraft, and we know that he was behind at least Heero's mail theft. I'd argue he's most likely behind poisoning Duo and attempting to have Heero deported. And if we accept for the sake of argument that all of those acts fit within a philosophy of radical Pacificism, all acts designed to “save” Relena from the evil Gundam Pilots, then it makes a certain kind of sense that he consistently left the real violence to his son. Olsen's a different kind of deranged. Exactly as you said, Neptune, demented. And we know he's capable of murder, because he killed his grandfather, probably for realising that Olsen was dangerous. But to me the question is whether Tropic expected Olsen to follow a script. Remember when Olsen tried to approach Relena in Sanq, the first time we caught him? We've been assuming he went off-book for that. So did Tropic hand Duo over to his crazy son, hand him a gun, and tell himself at least he isn't the one pulling the trigger? Or did he expect Olsen to do something specific, but Olsen went rogue again, and killing Duo was never part of the plan at all?'

'But why go after Duo at all?' Zechs turned his head to Cobra. She was leaning on her elbows on Neptune's gurney, her brows creased in thought. 'When you think about it. I accept everything you just said, Wind, but think about it-- Yuy's the greater threat. That's why we thought Olsen would head back to Sanq. Yuy's right beside the Princess. Duo's just a friend, and, not to put this crudely, but I think we can all assume that now that Yuy and the Princess are together in Sanq, Duo wasn't going to be in the picture much anymore. None of Tropic's attacks were crimes of opportunity, not in the traditional sense. He was escalating with every move, but all his attacks were deliberately designed to push the Pilots into getting themselves into trouble. Getting them deported or getting them thrown into prison where there'd be no access to the Princess. So why go after Duo, when he's basically succeeded in separating Duo from Relena?'

'Because Duo brings him Heero Yuy,' Mamba said. He snapped his fingers. 'That's exactly it. He knew Maxwell would call Yuy for help, and that Yuy would leave Sanq to do it.'

'How could he know that?' Zechs retorted, disturbed by the notion. Disturbed because, he thought with a sinking stomach, it sounded perfectly true. 'And even if it was true, why the rigamarole of trading his prisoners to his son? Especially knowing that Olsen is insane enough to execute them. And not just a Gundam Pilot, but also a fellow Preventer. Tropic is rational enough to expect that, and so far he's stayed away from overt violence.'

'How rational is he?' Cobra asked. 'Rational enough to decide his son is a liability, to expect that Duo or Neptune would be able to overpower him and kill him? And then call for Heero Yuy anyway?'

The others stared at her. 'No-one is that cold,' Neptune said, but trailed off uncertainly. 'Setting up his own son to die?'
'I don't think there's any real love lost,' Zechs admitted slowly. 'He did rush off to Sanq to help Olsen cover up Pargan's murder, but when he got back he said it was just a disappointment. He basically called his son a loser.'

'But it does work with the timeline.' Mamba tapped his pencil on his pad. 'At some point Tropic passed off the car to Olsen. And left him alone. If the real goal was to make sure Duo was out of the picture, he would have stayed until the end to see it done. But if the real goal is to get Heero Yuy to come to you, and if you don't really care if your son lives or dies in the doing, then you just set the board and wait to make your play. He's still out there. And so is Heero Yuy.'

'But waiting for what?' Zechs was unsettled. He rose to pace, going as far as the window, to look out over the parking lot below. 'Heero won't come openly to Brussels. He can't. So how can Tropic believe he'll even be able to find Yuy?'

'Yuy won't come openly,' Mamba repeated pointedly. He stood, grabbing his coat. 'We should check your apartment.'

'My apartment?' Zechs turned to face him. 'You can't believe--'

'I'm not accusing you,' Mamba said hastily, holding up both hands, palm-out. 'But I think it's worth staking out the area. He'll want to check in on Duo, and Duo's in your apartment. We might catch him in the act.'

'And what do we do if we do catch him?' Neptune demanded. 'Arrest him?'

'We're obligated to arrest him,' Mamba said. 'And we're obligated to follow through on a lead, so don't even pretend we can say we never thought of it.'

Neptune was staring at him with alarm. She bit her lip, catching Zechs' eyes. He shook his head, not even sure what he was denying. There was no way to get ahead of it. And if Mamba was right, if Heero really were there, watching-- God, if Duo knew that Heero was there and was contriving to meet up with him-- surely Duo wouldn't be that stupid?

Cobra stood. 'We're not Immigration. It's not our job to arrest him. Our only concern is Tropic, and preventing Tropic from assaulting anyone else. Agreed?'

Mamba squared off against his partner, meeting her eyes forthrightly. 'The law is the law.'

'And the law has priorities built into it. What Tropic has done is far worse than what Heero Yuy has. Which makes Tropic our priority.'

'And if Heero Yuy gets away in the dust-up?'

'Then it's Sanq's priority.'

Mamba clenched his jaw. 'Look, I know people in this room have a connection to the Pilots--'

'This isn't about how we feel,' Cobra said. 'It's about doing what's right, not what's technically correct.'

'Please,' Zechs said quietly. 'She's right. How many times have we been yanked in a hundred directions at once because we don't fundamentally distinguish between the mission and the reality? Focussing on Heero misses the point. If Heero's broken the law, there's already a legal way of handling it, and Sanq will have to deal with it. But the only people who can deal with Tropic are Preventers.'
'You all keep arguing,' Neptune said. 'Just don't leave until I'm ready.'

'Ready?' Mamba broke off glaring at his partner and looked down at her. Zechs followed his gaze, and realised Neptune had thrown off her blankets and was pressing the call button. 'What are you doing?'

'Going with you,'

'Like hell you are,' Zechs said. 'You haven't been cleared for active duty!'

'You know medical types, always playing the cautious hand. You need everyone you have on this. I'm fine.' She did make it to her feet steadily, but she was pale still, and Zechs had to bite his lip to stop himself from shoving her back down to her pillows.

'Is there something about this hospital that makes everyone so eager to leave it?' he demanded instead, and shook his head. 'You're not driving.'

'I can be content with that. For now.' She pointed to her bag of belongings. 'I believe my uniform is just there, if one of you will be so kind.'

'This is nuts,' Mamba muttered. But he surrendered with a sigh. 'I'll let Commander know where we're headed. Hydra can take care of following up with the Germans while we see if reality matches the mission.'

**

'Hey,' Duo said, when Zechs opened their door. 'I tried to call you. Is your phone off?'

Zechs checked it in his belt. The battery had died, unnoticed. 'What's wrong?' he demanded. 'Is it Heero?'

'Heero?' Duo stared at him warily. 'No. We have a guest.' He looked past Zechs' shoulder, and his expression brightened. 'Rebeka!'

'Hi, Duo.' Zechs moved aside to let Neptune in the door, and Duo gave her a quick kiss to the cheek. 'You look better than the last time I saw you.'

'Same to you. Digging the hair.' He touched the sweep of dark waves that covered the bandage on her head. 'You should keep it like that.'

'I'll think about it. You said you had a guest?'

'Yeah.' Duo met Zechs' eyes again. 'Don't flip out. Promise me.'

'Just tell me what's going on, Duo.'

Duo led the way inside. As they rounded the kitchen, Zechs took note of a coat draped over the bar stool, and the light on over the balcony. He looked sharply at Duo, and crossed his living room to yank open the sliding glass door.

Troyes Lefèvre rose. 'Hello, Agent Wind,' he greeted Zechs. 'Thank you for allowing my visit to your home.'
Zechs about-faced. Duo was there, scratching at his casted arm, chewing the inside of one cheek.

'Where is he,' Zechs said.

'Where's who.'

'Don't play with me. We may not have much time to stop something worse from happening. Where is Heero?'

'He isn't here.' Zechs shook his head, and abandoned persuasion. Neptune went to the spare room, and Zechs went to the master, throwing open the door and checking the corners, under the bed. Duo followed him in, standing in the doorway with tension written all over his body. 'He isn't here,' Duo repeated. 'Will you fucking listen to me?'

'Then he's nearby. Where?' Zechs wrenched open the blinds and scanned the street below. 'I almost didn't believe it.'

'You're acting crazy. Will you--'

'No, I will not. Tell me to my face that Lefèvre didn't transport Heero here.' He waited expectantly. Duo was silent, breathing in deep, quick inhales, his lips pressed white together. 'When did Heero get to you?' Zechs asked him bluntly. 'Was it in Germany? Is that why we can't find a body? Heero got rid of it. Why even admit you killed him? All you had to do was say he got away--'

Neptune had followed the shouting. She stood at Duo's shoulder. Troyes Lefèvre had come, too, though he didn't have their practise at standing straight for a fight. His shoulders were tight and he didn't meet Zechs' eyes.

'What do you want me to say?' Duo flicked his hair out of his eyes with a toss of his head, his chin defiantly high. 'I told Preventers the truth about what happened that night. I called Troyes for help. He called Preventers Hotline.'

'But could not get assurances,' Lefèvre added. He faltered when Zechs turned a glare on him, but went on quietly. 'I rang the Princess to tell her what had happened. And I flew to Brussels as soon as I heard that Duo was safe, to see for myself.'

'And where were you for the many hours between your original call to the Hotline and now? Preventers have been trying to track you down.'

'I have no explanation. I don't know why I did not receive their calls--'  

'I need all of you to stop lying to me.' Zechs gripped the wooden doorjamb, gathering his temper, his strength. 'Neptune. You of all people know how important it is that we operate with the facts.'

The three exchanged long looks. Damn, he had been a fool. He'd let Duo lie in the interview last night, and he'd gone to the ropes battling Sally for figuring it out before he did.

'Duo saved my life,' Neptune said finally. 'That's the part that matters, and it's still true. And you of all people know that Preventers is not at odds with compassion. Isn't that what you told me? I understand what you mean now. And we should be concentrating on finding Tropic, just like you said.'

'Tropic.' Duo stirred. 'What about him?'

'We suspect he'd come back here. On the expectation that Heero would also be here, trying to
'After Duo called--'
'I mean by what vehicle. Car, taxi, what.'
'A town car. From the airport to here.'
'And were you wearing a hat? Hood?'
'No.'
'Then we have to assume Tropic saw him enter. And that Tropic has some idea of who you are, if he's as obsessed with Relena as we think he is. Another factor to deal with.'
'You don't think this is a fake-out?' Duo said sharply. 'That he'd get us all here so that there'd be less people on Relena?'
Zechs inhaled deeply. 'Give me your phone. Now.'
Duo was already handing it over. Neptune was on hers as well, turning away as she rang. Zechs heard her say 'Commander' before she stepped into the kitchen to murmur softly. Zechs didn't spare any more time on it. He dialled Spider's number, and stood waiting for each ring with his stomach clenched.
'Spider,' he said, the moment he heard the line click. 'It's Wind. Get Relena out of there immediately.'
'What?' Spider said, startled. 'What's going on there?'
'I don't have time to explain it all, but I want Relena out of Malmö now. Communicate your new location through Command. And do not accept any communication whatsoever from Tropic. Repeat: do not communicate with Tropic. He's AWOL and suspect in a conspiracy that may include trying to kidnap the Princess. We're on alert for him in Brussels but until we know for sure where he's headed, we can't risk exposing Relena to danger.'
'Right. We'll move ASAP,' Spider accepted it rapidly, and Zechs heard him shout in dialect to his partner. He returned to Zechs a moment later. 'I take it we're missing the big party at HQ, eh.'
'Very big party,' Zechs said heavily. 'I'll fill you in later.'
'Better do. We're go. I'll check in when we're secure.' With nothing else, Spider hung up on him. Zechs punched 'end'.
'I thought Tropic took your phone,' he said to Duo.
Duo blinked once. 'He just chucked it into the kitchen when he was taking us. Or am I lying about phones now, too?'
'I don't damn well know, Duo.' There was a crack in the screen. He didn't know if it had been there before, but he knew Duo loved his little gadgets, and it washed that it might have been damaged in a careless throw in all the confusion. And Duo wouldn't have used the car phone in Germany if he'd had access to his own phone. But before he could quite think it through, he was touching the icon for 'Call History' and scrolling through all the recent numbers. Several calls from himself, a
few from Pieter Van den Broeck, a pair of numbers he didn't know but which had local and commercial area codes-- none from Sanq. And none from Heero's old number.

'Satisfied?' Duo asked tonelessly.

'I would be if you'd stop playing with me.'

'Not playing,' Duo said. 'It's anything but a game.' He took his phone when Zechs offered it. 'Is Relena okay?'

'For now.' He beckoned at Lefèvre. 'You're leaving.'

'He's not,' Duo disagreed. 'If Tropic does know his face, I don't want him wandering around trying to find a safe place to land.'

'He's not on Tropic's radar.'

'Know that for sure?'

'He's one more person to protect and we're already stretched thin.'

'He went out of his way to help me. Please.'

There were a lot of pleases going around. Zechs shook his head, but hopelessly. It wasn't an argument he was going to win, and Duo was right. If nothing else, Lefèvre knew too much to be set loose before they found Heero.

'Stay away from the balcony,' he said, and left them standing there. Neptune was just hanging up as he approached. 'Spider and Orange are moving Relena,' he told her.

'Commander will be in touch with them. They're going to put her double back out there, too. Tropic knew about Malmö, though, so if he's already watching, there's not much we can do but hope to distract him.'

'What a mess.' Zechs scrubbed his hands through his hair, scratching at his scalp. 'How did he get so far ahead of us?'

'We were busy giving him the benefit of the doubt. We overlooked his eccentricities because we wanted to trust one of our own.'

'And he spent a lot of time building up his defences.' Zechs leant on his refrigerator wearily. 'And tried his best to keep us all suspecting each other. He's been trying to turn me off Duo from the beginning, picking at our relationship, calling him a distraction. And he even went to Sally about you.'

'About me?'

Too late, Zechs remembered why he shouldn't have spilled that particular secret. 'Reporting--supposedly bad behaviour,' he said lamely. 'Trying to turn us all on each other.'

'Excuse me?' Her eyes were suddenly bright with fire. 'What bad behaviour would this be?'

Zechs rubbed his mouth. 'Sex... sexual harassment.'

'Of him?'
'Me.'

Unexpectedly, she burst into laughter. She slapped his arm. 'Oh, that's too funny.'

Zechs unclenched slowly. 'It is?'

'Isn't it? There's a certain kind of man who thinks any woman who dares to talk about sex ought to be locked away and treated for hysteria. I bet Sally tossed him out on his ass.'

'I think she probably did.'

'If that's the worst he could do to me, then I think we won't struggle all that much to put him down.' The mirth in her smile hardened, then. 'And I think I'm going to enjoy it. He's earned it.'

Zechs just about managed a smile that didn't feel too fake. 'Let's get Cobra and Mamba on the line. We need to lay out our plan.'

They left Duo and Lefèvre talking quietly on the couch, and used the computer room for their own conference. Zechs didn't shut the door-- he wanted Duo where he could see him, and not just for anxiety about his safety. Duo was lying, and he couldn't trust, not now. Neptune was lying, too, but somehow it was different; he understood why she was lying, and that it didn't have anything to do with Zechs and their relationship. But he believed both of them that wherever Heero was now, they didn't know, not for certain. They were worried, and that made Zechs worried.

'You're on speaker,' he told Cobra, and set his phone in the charger. 'We've been in contact with Spider and Orange, and they're moving the Princess of Sanq. We have to consider the possibility that Tropic either planned or is taking advantage of how things have fallen out to get access to the Princess while we're distracted trying to find Heero Yuy.'

'That's a horrifying thought,' Mamba said.

'Agreed,' Neptune said drily.

'One more twist,' Zechs added. 'And the reason we've been late getting to you. Troyes Lefèvre is here. I can't get confirmation from anyone here, but...' He hesitated, wondering how much to say. If Lefèvre was here because he'd brought Heero, then whether or not Tropic ever arrived there was still the question of where and when they'd unearth Heero hiding nearby. And he did not want to be responsible for Heero blowing up his fragile possibility at having a future in Sanq. Neither Duo nor Relena would forgive him, and he didn't believe, himself, that Heero deserved prison just for being trapped in a paranoid, compulsive quagmire with Duo. The best scenario he could imagine now was somehow finding a way to contact Heero before he got caught, and returning him to Sanq without Headquarters catching word of it until it was done.

'Windy?'

Neptune was watching him, not interfering. Zechs rubbed both his tired eyes. 'With no way of knowing where Tropic is, we can't be sure he didn't see Lefèvre enter the apartment here, so we're keeping him inside with Duo. We don't need extra targets. I want to set up a perimetre around the apartment and get a lock on all access points.'

'How can we be sure Tropic won't wait us out?' Cobra asked. 'He's been patient so far. All he really has to do is sit on his hands until something pulls us off protection.'

'Or until Olsen's body turns up,' Neptune said. 'If the locals come for Duo, it decides things one way or the other, from Tropic's perspective.'
'At least he'd be safe in prison.' Zechs twisted to look behind him. Duo had opened a bottle of wine, but only Lefèvre had a glass. Duo was standing just far enough back from the balcony doors that he could look out without being seen from the alley, and he stood tugging at the strap of his sling with a grim expression on his face.

'Maybe there's something to that,' Zechs said.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, what if Tropic is watching, and what he sees is a very public parade of local police carting Duo off to prison? It's what he wants. Our problem right now is that we don't know which direction Tropic's going to go. So we take away one of the possibilities. If Duo's imprisoned, he's out of the picture, and we can lay bets that Tropic will go to Sanq instead, to take out Heero Yuy.'

'I see a couple of major problems with that,' Neptune began.

'So do I,' Mamba said. 'From everything we've seen of him, do we know that Yuy would leave Brussels if Maxwell goes behind bars?'

'He will if Duo tells him to.' He met Neptune's eyes frankly. 'So let's put them in contact. Tropic is the priority. We'll deal with the rest of it as it comes.'

'Like whether or not we can get Duo out of prison when this is over?'

'They're going to come for him. He knows that, we know it. We can't sit on the fact that Duo confessed to killing Olsen. As soon as the Special Prosecutor gets the news, she'll be here with bells on. I burned her last time and she's going to leap at the opportunity to get Duo where she thinks he belongs.' He forestalled her protest. 'This is an inevitability. So we let it happen, and we use this time to fortify Relena. We put her and Heero somewhere visible, and we lay our trap. Tropic doesn't have his son to run the risks for him now. He'll have to act on his own, and we'll have our chance to catch him.'

Mamba was the first to agree. 'I'm in.'

'Good. Cobra?'

'What about Duo? Neptune's right. We can't be sure we can get him out of this if we let him go now.'

'I have an idea about that. He won't like it, but it's better than sitting in a locked cell for the rest of his life. Duo's smart. He'll make the right call.' And, if he was lucky, Sally would back him up. He didn't like to count his chickens before they hatched, but he didn't see he had much choice. 'Are you with me?'

'I'm with you,' she said reluctantly.

'Neptune?'

She bit her lower lip. 'I trust you. And I trust you not to throw this on a wild idea. I think.'

'Then these are our next steps. Mamba, coordinate with Commander. We need a big, public place to stage Heero Yuy's return to Sanq, and I want Relena surrounded by the entire strength of the Corps. Cobra, liaise with the locals. We can control the time and place of Duo's arrest, and we'll get cooperation if we make it look voluntary. Tell them he's going to turn himself in. And please call a local barrister; he's been Duo's attorney and he'll want to know what's going on. The name is Van
den Broeck. Neptune, you and I need to get to work convincing Duo to play his part.'

She drew a deep breath. 'I'm in.'

Zechs nodded. 'Then let's go, team.'

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He'd been proud of Duo before, but never quite in the way he was when Duo listened to his explanation, and agreed without question.

'You'll have a little time,' he said, in the long silence that followed. 'Cobra will be talking to the locals, but they won't be able to pull together a delegation to come get you until the legalities are satisfied. I'd say by tonight. Tomorrow morning at the latest.'

'It won't be the Asylum Centre, this time?'

'No. Likely it will be the Prison de Saint-Gilles.'

'Yeah.'

'Your conditions won't be harsh. And I don't think we'll see a repeat of deportation attempts. That backfired on them last time. They'll want to keep you here, to prevent embarrassment.'

'Okay.' Troyes offered Duo a glass of wine, and Duo took it without comment. He drank it steadily for several sips, then set it on the edge of the kitchen bar. 'What about Heero? What are his guarantees?'

'Preventers will take no actions against him. You have my word on that, and Commander Po's word. We can't give it to you in writing.'

'Same for Troyes.'

'The same for Troyes.'

Duo looked to the Frenchman. 'That okay with you? You take their word for it?'

Lefèvre inclined his head. 'If you trust them, then I will trust them.'

'Agreed?' Zechs asked.

Duo nodded once. 'Agreed.'

That had been the hard part. Zechs wanted that glass of wine for himself, but his job wasn't done, not yet. 'Now lay it out for me. The truth.'

'Off the record.'

'Off the record.'

Duo swiped a hand under his nose. He picked up the wine glass again, but didn't drink from it. 'We did tell the truth. Rebeka and I. Tropic got us out of the apartment, he changed places at some point
with the kid, and the kid pulled his crazy stunt with the gun and tried to kill us. So I hit him with the rock, like I said. I wasn't entirely sure he was dead. I felt for a pulse, but I wasn't sure. I had a lot of adrenaline going and I didn't know for sure if Tropic were still out there watching. So I grabbed Rebeka out of the trunk and I drove until we hit the dike. Then I called Troyes. I told him what had happened and I said he needed to call Preventers and tell them we were stuck somewhere and I couldn't figure out where. Tropic had ripped the navigation out and the kid had a road map, but it covered the entire fucking continent and I had no clue where we were.

'I contacted the Preventers Hotline,' Lefèvre said, taking up the narrative. 'The agent I spoke to was very dismissive. He told me they would take care of it. I had no choice but to believe him. But I called Relena next because she is very good friends with Duo, and of course Mister Yuy would want to know what had happened. And he was very distressed. He said...'

'What. What did he say,'

'He asked if I had the number they'd used to call. I gave it to him. The number for the car phone.'

'So you had contact with Heero while you were still with the car.' Zechs braced his arms on the bar, considering that. 'And he got your location.'

'I didn't have a location to give him,' Duo said. 'I didn't know where we were. And I was shaken. I'd just killed the fucking kid and I knew I'd be arrested for it. It was like-- it was like it was all for nothing, the last five years. At the end of the day I'm still a Gundam Pilot, and everyone is always going to see me that way no matter what I do.' He pulled himself in, closed his eyes. No-one spoke as he steadied himself. 'Heero told me to find a safe place. A house or a farm. To call in. To him. When I had a location. So we left the car. Rebeka and I, we just-- walked. She was in and out, and I carried her half of it, and I didn't think she'd die from it, but I wasn't sure. We finally found the farm. The family was good to us, they helped Rebeka, and they let me use the phone. I called Heero. At that point I was thinking, just to reassure him. But he-- he--'

'He got the location,' Lefèvre finished. 'And then he asked me to get him there.'

'Asked you,' Zechs said sceptically.

' Asked,' Lefèvre repeated mildly. 'I complied. I have a private plane that flies out of Sanq. I gave it over to his use.'

'Did you meet up with him?' Zechs asked Duo.

'Just for a minute. Outside the farm, I didn't want the family to see him, it just would have brought trouble for them. I sneaked out while they were occupied with Rebeka. I told him about the car, about Olsen. He said he'd take care of it. I said they'd figure it out when he never showed up again. He told me I should lie-- said you'd just assume he got away, or died somewhere you'd never find him, but that I wouldn't be blamed.'

'You should have listened to him,' Zechs said bluntly. 'Why didn't you? You'll lie about Heero's interference, but not about killing a man?'

'Rebeka saw it happen. She would have had to lie too. If we got caught, that would put her career on the line.'

Zechs scraped his hair behind his neck, but he was past fighting it. 'Then what.'

'He said he'd take care of it. That was the last I saw of him. But I think he's here. You said he hadn't turned up back in Sanq, and he never contacted Troyes for extract.'
'Do you have any way of reaching him?'

'I gave him my mobile phone,' Lefèvre said. 'If we contact him from Duo's line, I'm sure he would answer it.'

'Then let's do it.' Zechs touched Duo's phone, sitting on the counter. 'Bring him in.'

Duo picked it up. His thumb scrolled with ease of practise over the touch screen, lingered for just a second. He put the phone to his ear.

'It's me,' he said, just a second later. 'It's over. You need to get back to Sanq. Troyes will pick you up.' There was some protest too soft to hear; Zechs knew it only because of the dip of Duo's eyes. 'No,' Duo said then. 'I'm telling you. It's over. Thank you. But it's over.'
Duo's neck was salty with sweat when Zechs put his mouth to it. The rub of their bodies was almost torturously inadequate; he burned, clenching every muscle he had to hold out just a little longer. Duo hadn't come yet. He wanted Duo to come first.

But it just wasn't happening. The shower water was already cold. Duo had knocked the lever to a dribble at least ten minutes ago. Duo was still hard in his hand, but he was concerned-- they'd been at it long enough for Duo to be sore. But it wouldn't end.

Duo propped an arm up on the tile. It slipped in the wet, and he knocked the bar soap from the shelf. Zechs shifted left to avoid stepping on it.

'Don't worry about it,' Duo whispered. 'Good practise for prison.'

'Duo.'

Duo pushed away from him, sliding free. He threw back the curtain and stepped out of the cubicle. Zechs turned to watch, uncertain if he was meant to follow. But Duo reached back for him. Pulled him in by the wrist. He left the shower and followed Duo to the sink. Duo bent low over it, tugged him near. Pulled Zechs' arm close around his waist. Zechs didn't ask if he was sure. He moved in close. The way Duo tensed when he fitted their bodies made Zechs grind his teeth. He cupped Duo by the groin. But it wasn't quite right. He smoothed his palm up, over Duo's flat belly, over his damp chest. He found the same spot on his neck to kiss. He traced a string of wet hair along Duo's jaw, lifted it away. Buried his nose in Duo's smell. It was going to be gone from him for a while. It was one last chance.

When he brushed his lips over Duo's ear, Duo shivered. Tilted his head for it. Zechs did it again, stroked Duo's cheek, the line of his jaw. This time, when he lowered his hand to take Duo in his fist, it was time. Duo choked off a gasp into his own shoulder, and Zechs wrapped him tight.

Afterward, he pulled their towels from the rack on the door. Duo gave his hair a weary scrub. 'She's waiting for us,' he murmured. 'She knows what we're doing in here.'

Probably. But she wouldn't interrupt them. 'They won't put you in general population,' Zechs said. 'They can't. They'd be liable.'

'I don't want to talk about it.' Duo dried himself and tossed the towel over the sink. He yanked his jeans on, awkward with his casted arm, and buttoned them one-handed. 'They won't. I know. They didn't before.'

Zechs fingered his hair back from his face and wrapped it in an elastic. 'You know it's only for a while. Until we can deal with Tropic.'

'I'm not part of the equation any more. Just keep Relena safe. And Heero.'

'We will. I hope you believe me.'

'I believe you.' Duo met his eyes. 'I do believe you. You're doing what I would do. Anything it takes to keep your people safe. I get that. I trust that.'

His throat was tight. But what if it doesn't work, he wanted to say. What if, what if. But Duo was right. Duo of all people knew himself, and knew what he could put his faith in.
Duo's fingers curled in his. Duo lifted his hand to his cheek. Kissed his knuckles.

'Be good while I'm gone,' Duo said.

Zechs bent to press their lips together. 'I will.'

Of his fellow agents, only Neptune had remained behind. Cobra and Mamba were on their way to HQ, to pick up Sally and move on to Sanq, to prepare for manoeuvres there. Troyes was hours gone, now, meeting Heero Yuy in a location every Preventer had been careful not to ask about. Zechs took longer dressing, but when he emerged, he found his friends sitting on the couch together, heads together, hands tightly clasped. For Duo, he was glad of the comfort. And he was grateful once again to Neptune, for bringing Duo back to him once and for being here to save him one more time.

If they really did pull this off, it would save Duo. If they didn't...

Duo cleared his throat and sat back. He scraped wet hair behind his ears. 'We ready?' he asked.

Neptune helped him with the strap of his sling. 'You think they'll let you keep it?'

'Probably not,' Zechs said. 'But they'll give him one from their own clinic.'

A broken arm could be a deadly disadvantage, in a prison that was bound to have one or two hardened types who would know who Duo was. Even if they didn't, he was a young, attractive man, small in stature. Zechs didn't doubt he would hold his own. But for how long? If Duo was lucky and the authorities cooperated Duo would spend his time in the numbing isolation of a solitary cell. Which would be worse? But Duo had still said yes.

All of them jumped at the knock. 'It's probably Van den Broeck,' Zechs said. 'He must have rushed.'

'I'll get it.' Neptune rose, but Duo stopped her with a touch of the hand. He went to the door himself, unlocking and opening it. He no sooner opened it than Van den Broeck, not even over the threshold, looped him tight in two long arms. Twenty years old or not, Duo only stood resistant for a moment. He was blushing dully when Van den Broeck finally let him go, but stayed close to his mentor as they locked up again and rejoined the Preventers on the couch.

'Thank you for coming, Pieter,' Zechs said, extending a hand. Van den Broeck gripped it tightly. 'We all appreciate it.'

'Though I think I am here as a friend today, and less as a lawyer.' Van den Broeck sank down onto the couch, tucking his coat between his knees. 'You must know there is very little I can do now.'

Duo nodded. 'I know.'

'I am sorry, my friend,' Pieter said simply. He put his hand on Duo's denim-covered knee. 'Trouble follows some people. Let us hope only because you are strong enough to survive it.'

'I'm not worried about strong enough.' Duo caught Zechs' eyes. 'I'm worried about Relena and Heero. Tropic knows Preventers from the inside. And if he's from Sanq, he knows the countryside, too. He can guess where you'll stash her and how you'll try to protect her.'

'Guessing isn't the same as beating it.' Zechs detoured to the kitchen. Bread, butter, and, with a little searching, some cheese and cucumbers. 'Duo, you should eat.'
'I'm not hungry.'

'You don't know when they'll get around to it at Saint-Gilles.' Zechs cobbled together a sandwich that was rather more wobbly than what Duo would have produced, but it would eat the same. He brought the plate to Duo.

Duo took it. 'We've got to figure he knows his son is dead. We wouldn't all have been swanning around here for days if we'd just somehow escaped.'

'We've thought of that. It at least increases the chances he'll have to make the stupid, rash moves himself.'

'My point is that now he's a lone crazy. Lone crazies take bigger risks. And I don't think your ideas about Radical Pacifism really hold water.'

'What do you mean?' Neptune asked curiously. 'We found evidence.'

'That he dicked around with some hippie chicks at university. Treize Khushrenada sure as hell wasn't a Pacifist, but he was definitely interested in Relena. And in you, Zechs.'

'Me?'

'The prince of Sanq.'

It was an automatic discomfort he felt, even though Duo was hardly revealing anything that the other two didn't already know. Van den Broeck had recognised him immediately, and Neptune had figured it out for herself long ago. Still, he felt tension in his backbone, and tried to shake it.

'You did say Tropic kept warning you off Duo,' Neptune mused. 'And the rest of us heard it at one point or another. And he really didn't like it when you'd pull one of your off-the-book moves. He said once you of all people should be above it. I thought at the time he said it because we all knew Sally wanted you to be Deputy.'

'And he dosed me with GHB the night we were going to have sex,' Duo added. 'I guess he thought if I looked like a big slut then the Prince of Sanq wouldn't want anything to do with me.'

This time it was Zechs who blushed. Neptune buried a smile, but Van den Broeck just looked stiffly away. Leave it to Duo to unearth a new truth in the bluntest possible way. Zechs cleared his throat. 'I didn't know you were planning on-- that-- that night.'

'We were definitely getting closer to it.' Duo's smile faded. 'You were patient. I liked that.'

'We will find him, Duo.' Neptune squeezed his hand. 'I promise. And the rest of it--'

'The rest of it will be what it will be.' Duo inhaled deeply. 'So we just wait, now? I hate waiting.'

'I know.' Zechs nudged the plate of sandwich on the coffee table. 'You could fill the time with eating.'

With a sigh, Duo obeyed him. 'Don't let him eat like this while I'm gone,' he told Neptune. 'There's a reason I'm the one who cooks in this relationship.'

Van den Broeck followed Zechs to the balcony when Zechs wandered there next, in some faint hope of spotting his missing partner on the street. Of course, it was empty below, not even an out-of-place car to stare at suspiciously. It was a grey, overcast day, a stubborn winter that refused to
leave them. A brisk walk outside would have done Duo good, but they had to be here for the police escort, whenever it arrived. Zechs checked the time. It wouldn't be long. Already it was mid-afternoon.

'Agent Cobra was light on details for what will come next,' Van den Broeck told him quietly. Zechs stirred himself with a small shake. 'He'll go to prison.'

'Without a body, there is no proof.'

'But they can hold him on his confession, and a Preventer's corroboration. And people have been tried without a body before.'

'It cannot escape your calculations that there may not be a trial. Not again.'

No, it hadn't. There wouldn't be many people in favour of giving a Gundam Pilot another day in the sun, especially if it meant he'd walk free again. And Relena's diplomatic superpowers couldn't be abused again without destroying her cachet. 'I think you'll like this even less than Duo,' Zechs murmured. 'But we do have a last resort.'

'A last resort?'

Zechs turned to face the man. 'There's a clause in Preventers' Charter that gives us the ability to bring in certain categories of people to act as Temporary Appointment Agents. It was meant for me, in the days in which it was entirely possible that both Zechs Merquise and Milliardo Peacecraft could be charged with crimes against humanity. It's not a rule that could ever be passed today, but in those fresh days after the war we had-- some extraordinary leeway.'

Van den Broeck was an intelligent man and he figured it out quickly. 'Certain categories of people,' he repeated coolly. 'Such as a prisoner. And I assume from your presence that Temporary Appointment has an indefinite term.'

'Exactly.'

'You'll spring him from jail only to trap him in Preventers' employ!'

'He's already agreed.'

'Given the alternative he could hardly fail to. That does not make it right.' Van den Broeck checked his rising voice. 'I had thought you more committed to him than to force him into this. He's already turned Preventers down a dozen times with far more pleasant offers. He does not want to be a soldier.'

'He doesn't want to be a prisoner, either.'

He expected Van den Broeck to fight him. But Van den Broeck only shook his head. 'How frequently this happens,' he muttered. 'It will ruin him.'

'He'll have to be strong enough.' Zechs rubbed his face. He'd forgotten to shave, during their shower, and his jaw was bristly now. 'He is strong enough. Believe in that.'

The police came just after seven. No sirens; that was enough to be thankful for, tense as they all were, but Neptune spotted the arrival of the caravan. They stayed seated on the couch, surrounding Duo, who had gone silent and grim in the last hours, locked down. Preparing himself. He did not flinch at the sound of a dozen pairs of feet on the stairs, not even at the pounding on the door.
Zechs stayed with him as Van den Broeck opened the door, and let them in.

The two who entered were, not surprisingly, the Special Prosecutor, and a uniformed policeman who wasted no time in freeing his wristcuffs.

'Duo Maxwell,' the Prosecutor said.

Duo stood. Zechs rose, and Neptune came to his side as well. She shook her head at Zechs. No sign of Tropic outside. But if they were right-- and they needed to be right-- he was watching somehow.

'It will be okay,' Duo told him briefly. Zechs nodded, his throat tight. He ought to be reassuring Duo. But he didn't have words.

Duo left them, stepping out of their protective circle. He held out his hands, wrists together. He let the policeman wrap one in cuffs and then turn him, to chain him with his hands behind his back. The policeman patted him down for weapons, thorough on the baggy weight of his hoodie and even probing his casted arm, down his legs and the surface of his trainers. When the man stood and nodded toward the Prosecutor, she signed the papers she held, and extended them to Zechs.

'Our thanks to Preventers for bringing us this case,' she said, giving Zechs a hard smile. 'May our future collaborations be as fruitful.'

'Truly,' Zechs answered, and signed his name, officially transferring Duo to their custody. 'Please keep us updated about his conditions. For the records.'

'Oft course,' she said.

It was slow going on the stairs. They'd brought far too many people for one slender Gundam Pilot, but the show was what they'd wanted. Zechs' neighbours stood in open doors to watch the procession, and they garnered attention on the street, as well, people drawn by the flashing police lights and the cars parked in a rough semi-circle in the street, blocking traffic. Duo was escorted to one of the cars, and they pushed him inside without even a chance to look back. Once he was inside, Zechs couldn't see him through the tinted windows. Neptune wrapped her hands about his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. Zechs looked down at her, puzzled. It wasn't like her to display that kind of girlish upset. He patted her hand awkwardly, and she sighed heavily against him, even swaying before Zechs caught her.

Van den Broeck walked by with the Special Prosecutor. 'I'll follow them to Saint-Gilles,' he told Zechs. 'I should be able to stay with him for another hour or two. I'll let you know.'

'Thank you,' Zechs said, but Van den Broeck was already past him. He went in the front of Duo's car. It was only another minute before the rest of the crowd divided up in vehicles, and then those vehicles were wheeling about and driving off. In short order, the street was empty.

'We should get back to HQ,' Zechs said.

'Yes.' Neptune wiped her eyes dramatically. 'Did you lock up?'

'Yes.' Zechs gestured to his own company car, and walked her to it, carefully supporting her faltering steps. 'Are you-- feeling all right?'

He shut her into the passenger seat and climbed into the driver's. He checked the street automatically, but if Tropic was there, he was as good as invisible.
'Let him think we're all weak,' Neptune said, suddenly fine. 'He'll underestimate us that much more. If he buys the weak woman act, I might be able to get close enough to rip his balls off. I think Duo would like that as a belated New Years gift.'

Zechs barked out a laugh before he caught himself. 'You're terrifying.'

'Good,' she said succinctly.

**

Sally met him at his desk. Their eyes met, and Zechs inclined his head. Sally lowered hers in sympathy.

'Hard?' she asked quietly.

'Unbelievably.'

'There's an upside,' she said.

Zechs dropped his coat on his chair. Tropic's side of their cubicle was empty, of course. Zechs gave it a long look, and turned his back on it. 'Upside?'

'I don't think you've ever loved anyone enough to do what you did today.'

That caught him. Certainly he'd had terrible motivations before: vengeance had sustained him two solid decades, but had left him empty and bitter when one death had failed to change the universe. His parents had been revenged, and Sanq had risen again, but nothing could be as it was when he was a child, and it had been a child's fury and grief that had failed to see that, not a grown man's acceptance of a complicated world. But he was a grown man now. And while he'd cared, and cared deeply, for people, including the woman standing by him now, he'd never-- loved.

'He won't thank me for it,' he rasped, and sat.

'Don't sell him short. He did it for you as much as for himself. More, maybe.'

'And how can he fail to resent me for it, one day?'

'The same way he can love Heero even though Heero left him for Sanq. The same way he can love Relena even though she took his best friend away. That's what love is, Zechs.'

It was too early and too raw to respond to that. He buried it by turning to touch his computer on.

'Did Yuy report in?''

'Three hours ago.' Sally rested against the wall of his cubicle. 'Of course Spider and Orange asked him for an official reason behind his disappearance. Guess what he said.'

'What?'

''I took a walk',' Sally deadpanned.

Even Zechs cracked a grin for that. 'He didn't dare.'
'Oh, yes. I think we have a long way to go with that one.' She sobered then. 'On the downside, we can't officially ask him about Árni Olsen. Which means we may never locate the body.'

Zechs shook his head. 'Can you honestly say anyone will miss him?'

'I just don't like loose ends. What are you checking for?'

'FreeSpace,' Zechs said. 'I owe Agent Mèo a check-in.'

'Don't bother. I pulled you off it. Mèo's capable of running it solo, and we don't need the distraction.'

Zechs stiffened. 'I apologise, Commander.'

'Don't,' she said again, and touched his shoulder. 'You were right, and I wasn't. By the way, I have something for you.' She put an envelope on his desk. 'The paperwork is for a slower day, but the badge is for now.'

Badge? Zechs unwound the string and shook it upended over his hand. Yes, badge. Silver pinned to a slip of olive leather. Deputy.

When he looked up to thank her, she was gone.

**

Sanq felt even less welcoming than usual.

There was no detouring from landing at the small airport and hustling into the waiting van. The local Preventers had spared only a single escort, so they crammed together with all their equipment and weapons. It was a tense, silent ride. Neptune had not been allowed to join them in this adventure, with a barely stable head injury, and Zechs already missed her presence. She had gone ahead of them hours ago, and joined Spider and Orange in protecting Relena, whose company had expanded to include her walk-about lover and Troyes. There weren't many places the well-known face of Sanq's Princess could go unobserved, and there was no question of removing her from the country so long as she refused to leave Heero behind her, so their options had been limited. Zechs would have preferred to remove her from the equation entirely, but he'd been overruled, and he could hardly argue, because it had been, really, his own idea.

'We need visibility now,' Sally had said flatly. 'Tropic can stay out in the cold for far longer than we can protect Relena in some secret hide-away. Not to mention that she has to function as a head of state. Hiding her doesn't help anything. We need her out where Tropic can see her, the same as Duo. And we need Heero standing right next to her, daring him to make a move.'

It was only common sense, of course, but it made Zechs itch under the skin. If any harm came to Relena because they'd exposed her, he wouldn't have to worry about forgiving himself. Heero would murder him.

So they'd gone back to Malmö. They'd walked Relena very publicly back into the residence, and posted guard, because Tropic would expect them to, and snipers, because regulations required it, and then they'd walked Heero Yuy around the perimeter as if explaining all of their preparations to him. If Tropic were watching, he'd see what would, they hoped, infuriate him enough to make a
They did it again on the hour. By the time Zechs arrived, Heero had been through it four times. Zechs went with him for the fifth.

Yuy was not best pleased to see him. It was a mutual feeling. They went almost the full walk around Malmö's grounds before Yuy broke the silence.

He said, 'Duo. He did better in prison than me. Before.'

Zechs shortened the strap of his assault rifle so that it hung better cocked for a sudden shoot-out. 'He was younger then,' he answered. 'And he was doing it for you.'

'So now he'll do it for you.'

They passed through an ivied arch into the tiered gardens. Malmö was only a very large house, not a proper palace, but the gardens were spread over acres in a veritable forest of botanicals and shade trees, and they would afford a savvy man like Tropic plenty of cover, particularly at night. Zechs flexed his finger over his rifle's trigger.

'Will it be enough?' he asked.

Heero had yet to look him in the face. It was not avoidance. He was too busy scanning with his eyes, seeking out every miniscule clue from the landscape, staring like a hawk for any tiny movement. He wore that wrinkled yellow shirt again, nothing that spoke especially of danger, but he walked like a man ready to commit dangerous deeds. His hands hung open and empty at his sides-- no Preventer had wanted to give him a weapon, even if it weren't against the law, but he didn't look much like he'd need one. Zechs knew better than most men how deadly Heero Yuy was, with or without help.

'What happened to your cap?' Zechs asked.

'What cap?'

'The one Relena made you.'

Heero blinked once, and turned to his left. 'I had to leave it in Brussels. She's knitting me a new one.'

'What did you do with the body?'

They were alone. He wouldn't have asked it if they weren't. Heero didn't look at him, even for that. 'It's gone,' he said.

'It didn't solve anything.'

'It should have.' Heero clenched his fists slowly. Zechs watched it. 'I told him. He's too stubborn. He thinks there should be rules, that the rules will protect people. Protect his people.'

'In a fair world.'

'It's not,' Heero said softly. 'A fair world. You're making him a Preventer.'

Zechs ground his teeth together. He could see all the way to the treeline, not beyond it, the heavy brush that could be hiding a man and his private arsenal. 'We're not evil. We're not even the worst of a dozen bad options.'
'Where will you station him?'

'There's been no time to think about that.'

'So you'll slap that together, too.'

'Improvise. We have to be light on our feet. You of all people should recognise that mode. Or didn't it occur to you when you went charging out of Sanq that you might be making things worse for him? Or Relena? What if you'd been caught?' Heero's very breath was dismissive, and Zechs had to suck in a deep breath to keep from shaking him. 'What?'

Heero never so much as looked at him. 'You're not competent enough to catch me,' he said. 'And Preventers wouldn't know “light feet” if you were kicked with it. You're slow. You're unwieldy. You move in groups, you wait for confirmed intelligence, and you don't shoot until they do. At least in OZ you didn't hesitate to mow down civilians.'

'We don't really have the time to re-fight the war, Yuy.'

'Then make the time.' Heero pivoted, but whatever had caught his attention, he was back to walking a moment later. 'If you make the same mistakes now that you did then, you'll lose.'

Relena was easier. She was used to being moved swiftly and told little about it, so she asked him no questions, when he came to bid her good night. It was not brotherly suspicion-- much-- that made him wait until he knew she was in her bedroom to do it, but he was nonetheless relieved to see no sign that Yuy was sharing it with her. If nothing else, he would have expected more mess.

She was seated on her bed-- her happily small bed-- brushing her hair when he entered. Zechs sat next to her, propping his rifle on the carpet below. 'You're in for the night,' he told her. 'There will be two Preventers outside your door for the duration. If you need anything, hear anything, call.'

'I will.' She tucked her small feet beneath her. 'Heero said there's holes in the defences. You're trying to leave this rogue agent a path inside?'

'On the assumption that he'll recognise them for what they are, but feel compelled to use them anyway.'

'I take it you agree, or you wouldn't be doing it.' She smiled for him, tapping his wrist with her hairbrush. 'May I suggest something?'

'Of course. Always.'

'Offer him the opportunity to speak to me. In person. That might spare us the violence you're so keenly anticipating.'

Zechs glanced away from her. He had to. Her guileless, even look was too much challenge for him. 'He's earned a little violence, Relena. Because of him, a boy is dead, and even if that boy was no innocent, that's Tropic's failure, as well. That boy killed Pargan. Tropic's done nothing but inflict pain and suffering.'

'And he'll have his. His son is dead. He'll fail at whatever it is he's trying to do now. And he'll live a long and miserable life in prison. He has that coming to him. It can't happen if you shoot him dead on sight.'

Zechs shook his head. 'We don't have a way of contacting him anyhow.'
'What's the saying?' Relena tied her hair with a ribbon. 'Broadcast on all frequencies.'

**

'Is this genetic?' Sally demanded.

'Genetic?' Zechs repeated uncertainly.

'This Peacecraft need for complication.'

Zechs absolutely did not smile. 'I'm not necessarily recommending the idea. But-- it is a possibility.'

'He'll know it's a trick.'

'So we make it not a trick. Let him have his say. Who knows. He might even come quietly if he has a chance to spew his hatred for a while.'

Neptune spoke up. 'I don't like it,' she said. 'Preventers don't negotiate with people like Tropic. Our duty is to bring him in, dead or alive.' She scrunched her face comically. 'So if we can do our duty without ammo, I... suppose we should do it whether we like it or not.'

Somehow she'd struck the right note. Sally was caving. 'I'll let you two tell Heero,' she muttered. 'Come up with a plan that protects every inch of the grounds and I'll consider it. Consider it.'

'We'll be in communication,' Zechs said, and cut their connection. He raised an eyebrow at Neptune. 'So? We're really thinking about this?'

'As an alternative to waiting weeks or even months for Tropic to decide whether he wants to make another move? It's been days already. He's got to know his son is dead. Maybe he's decided to cut his losses?'

'The idea of him waiting out there for years puts my nerves in a grinder.' Zechs found a wall to lean his head against. He was bone-tired. It was early morning, by now, and there'd been little sleep for days before this one.

'Do you think he's okay?'

He knew without asking that she meant Duo. If Zechs was tired, Duo had to be dead on his feet. He hoped by now Duo was sleeping, safe in a cell. 'Do you think I rushed it?' he asked, trusting her to answer him honestly. 'Should I have tried something else.'

'The only other thing we could have done was smuggle him out of the country. And if we'd tried it, everyone would have known it was us, and he'd be a fugitive for the rest of his life. And that's without knowing whether we would have started a diplomatic disaster between whoever took him in and the rest of the world that wants him contained.'

'I asked Yuy about the dead boy. I don't know why it even matters.' Zechs paused, unsure why he'd even brought it up. Neptune's face was grave and gave back absolutely none of her thoughts; she was far more competent than he'd thought her, this past year. How easily Tropic had played on his anxieties about a workplace that he'd feared wouldn't accept him, agents who were merely mortal
men and women, not ideal officers in the mould of Treize Khushrenada's Platonic perfection of the
breed. But when had any mortal man or woman been perfect? Not Treize, who'd lived just long
enough to bury his own ignoble roots and rise to unparalleled heights on the sheer power of
ambition and greed. Not Zechs, who had followed him for as long as it benefited and left him when
his loyalty was truly tested. Not Une, who had been a mad dog when Treize needed one, a meek
and comely ambassador when he'd needed that, and only found her own voice when her master had
finally abandoned her. Noin, who'd never truly believed, Noin might be the only one of them who'd
escaped clean. Neptune reminded him of her. Healthy. Not just in body, not just a beautiful
specimen who wore the uniform well. A woman who'd known herself without OZ telling her. A
woman who'd been able to love openly, and easily, frightening him. All that emotion, that
devotion, given so freely.

'I think I owe you a number of apologies,' he said finally.

She looked at him. Her mouth quirked, not quite a smile. 'I'll issue a blanket pardon. That's what
friends do, isn't it?'

'We are friends, then?'

'I'd like to think so.' She stirred. Her hand extended, her manicured nails catching the light. But
when Zechs squeezed her fingers, her grip was strong.

'Thank you,' Zechs said. 'For everything. For him and for me.'

'We'll make it work, Zechs. You'll see.'

He wasn't entirely sure he believed that. But he nodded, and she smiled for him.

**

Spider marked it on the calendar with a large 'x' through the date. 'Five days and counting, my
colleagues.'

Zechs grimaced over his water. He wanted something stronger, but he knew better. He'd even come
to be wary of tea and coffee-- too many stimulants were just as bad as too many depressants. He
needed his wits about him and in their natural state. But Spider was right. Tropic had been at large
for five days. No, longer; five since they'd brought Relena back so publically to Malmö, and three
days before that, nearly four, after Tropic had handed prisoners over to his son and disappeared
through the aftermath. If he was watching, they had no way of knowing. If he was listening to their
appeals, he wasn't answering. Every hour on the hour they'd sent out a message on all frequencies
used by Preventers. Come in and talk. Safe passage guaranteed.

Nothing.

And every hour on the hour they'd paraded Heero Yuy around the grounds. Even Yuy had grown
tired of his constant vigilance, and no longer wasted effort staring off into the horizon for signs of
distant movement.

A knock at the door of their suite-turned-office made them all jump. Orange, outright asleep in his
chair, nearly sprawled to the floor in an effort to go hopping to his feet. Cobra cracked a weary
smile for it as she answered the door.
It was Relena and Troyes Lefèvre, heading a veritable convoy of kitchen carts. 'Dinner,' Relena announced brightly. 'And no protests. I know you're all but dead on your feet. A real hot meal is just what you need.'

'No objections from me,' Spider said enthusiastically. He whipped a lid from a tray and inhaled deeply. 'Ah. Magical.'

'And a cart's gone out to all your agents who are on watch duty,' Relena added, directing her cart-pushers with little flips of her hand. 'Everyone's getting a tray.'

Troyes was already dispensing plates. 'Mister Duo said this is your favourite,' he murmured to Zechs, setting it before him. The cover came off to reveal a crisp fillet of sablefish and whole morrel mushrooms. Zechs hid his own smile with his hand. 'I was instructed to be sure the chef followed the recipe exact,' Troyes added. 'Though I do not know how it could be as good as if Duo himself prepared it.'

'I can't imagine that myself.' Zechs wet his lips. 'Thank you. A lovely gesture.'

'I am under strict orders.' Troyes gave him a napkin and a set of silverware. 'Enjoy it. It will make him happy.'

Yes, it would. As it made Zechs happy to have a treat before him, even if that treat had likely been in planning before Duo had been taken away from him. But it whet his appetite as sandwiches had not. Zechs ate with no more prodding.

'That's better,' Relena decided, seating herself beside him. 'You've all been looking wan. Perhaps you ought to think about hiring a new crop of agents. Or contracting.'

'It would seem to be a worthy thought.' The fish was flaky and perfectly seasoned. The butter emulsion tasted like truffles-- not an ingredient Duo would have afforded, but Zechs was willing to grant that license. 'Thank you, as well. I know it hasn't been easy, being exiled in your own kingdom.'

'You'll do as you see fit. All I hope is that one day it won't be necessary.' She stole a sliver of mushroom from his plate. 'Promise me you'll sleep tonight. You look horrid.'

'The meal will help, as you said.' Zechs swallowed a massive bite. 'You don't look well-rested, yourself. You're not worried about Tropic?'

'He's upended my kingdom,' she said tartly. 'It's not that I'm not glad to have Heero here. Of course I am. But exile away from my own capital? And Pargan.' Her small fingers plucked at a napkin's seam. 'I have a nightmare about him. Trapped under the dirt in his garden. Dying alone.'

Zechs covered her hand. 'Then you do understand why we want so badly for Tropic to give us a reason.'

'Of course I understand wanting it. That's not the same thing as wanting to be his executioner.'

'You have more virtue than me.'

'No.' She smiled sadly. 'But maybe more luxury for my principles. If I had to hold the gun, I don't know that I would resist. If I'd been a better shot, there would have been no Lady Une to create Preventers.'

'You were a child then,' he said.
She met his gaze, clear-eyed. 'We've always had that in common, you and I.'

Every agent in the room reached for the comm unit at the same time, alerted by the sharp buzz. 'Message from HQ,' Zechs said, already rising. 'Relena, Troyes--'

Troyes was already moving Relena to an inside wall near the exit. Good. He'd been trained enough, and scared enough recently, to assist in his own defence, and in Relena's. Spider and Orange were there only an instant later, a wall of muscle raised in automatic protection of one of the Earth-Sphere's greatest assets. Zechs dialled, and put his phone to his ear.

Sally answered after a single ring. 'Trouble,' she greeted him.

'Tropic?'

'Worse, in a way. We've just received a red-level alert from Border Patrol.'

'The city?'

'Not that border. The border between Earth and Colonial Space. They slipped through on a shipping protocol, and they managed to get through customs as well. How anyone could fail to recognise them in this country particularly is beyond me--'

'Sally, which country? Who are you talking about? They?'

'The Gundam Pilots. They landed in Sanq's national airport thirty minutes ago. They have a vehicle and they're headed toward you. An employee at the rental car company recognised Quatre Winner. He was gossiping about it and an off-duty airport security officer heard him, and called it in.'

Zechs snapped his fingers at his fellow agents. 'No attack,' he told them. 'We have Gundam Pilots. All of them, Sally?'

'Three men. From the descriptions, it's all three of them. They're on all the no-fly lists, but there's no global don't-rent-these-people-a-car database.'

'And their objective is the residence?'

'Ve don't know, but I know who I want to ask.'

Heero. Who had proven before he could get information into and out of the Colonies.

'I'll keep you informed,' Zechs told his commander, and hung up. 'Get Yuy on the line. Now. Relena, did you know he'd called them in for backup?'

Her colour was heightened, a flush on her cheeks. 'No,' she said. 'The Gundam Pilots? They're coming here?'

'So it would seem. Orange, who has Yuy?'

'Mamba.' Orange passed him the comm. 'They're at the south gate.'

Zechs held the comm to his lips as he opened the door to their suite, checking up and down the hall for staff lingering near. Empty. 'Yuy? he called, ducking back inside and securing the door by leaning on it. 'Answer me now.'
'What,' came the irritated response.

'When did you call them in?'

To his credit-- no, Zechs thought, irritated himself, to Preventers' embarrassment-- Yuy didn't even pretend not to know what he meant. 'Two days ago,' Heero answered. 'Are they here yet?'

If they were a half hour out of the airport, it wouldn't be long. Zechs didn't bother to answer him. 'Can you speak to them now?' he demanded. 'Tell them they absolutely cannot be seen coming in.'

'No method. But why shouldn't they be seen? The entire essence of your defence is visibility.'

Now he understood how Sally had felt, hearing those words from Zechs days ago. He wanted to grind his teeth into powder. 'Communications crash,' he told his fellow agents. 'Starting now. No-one uses a line in or out or between rooms here until we have custody of incoming. We can't spare the people to meet them on the road, but we control entry. And tell those snipers they can't shoot a Gundam Pilot without starting a damn war.'
'Water,' Quatre Winner asked. 'Please.'

Cobra poured from the carafe on the silver cart in the corner-- three glasses, though Barton disdained it when offered. Chang accepted it with a chilly nod, and set it down immediately. Winner was the only one who drank. His hand shook visibly.

Zechs silently texted a message to Mamba and Neptune, who had gone to ground in the residence with their respective charges, Heero and Relena. *Stay low until contact,* he typed. *Yuy especially. Motives still unclear.*

'Thank you,' Winner said. 'It was a long flight. We're-- we're--' He clamped his lips between his teeth. 'Grateful,' he finished carefully.

'A long flight,' Zechs echoed. 'Yes. A long and very illegal flight.'

'And?' Chang interrupted.

'And your presence here is an open invitation to every law enforcement agency on the planet.'

'Yes,' Winner agreed. 'But they'll move slowly. It's not so simple to dr-- dr--'

'Draft an extradition agreement,' Chang finished for him. 'Law enforcement may certainly arrest us. What they will do with us is a thornier question. Or do I mistake this hospitality for something other than a command to hide us?'

It was surreal. It was almost the same argument he'd had with Duo when Duo had contrived to be arrested in Heero's place. Bait and switch. No-- not surreal. Deliberate. Heero had been there. And Heero Yuy had never had a problem borrowing a trick once he'd seen it work.

He drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. 'All right,' he murmured. 'Let's try a little blunt honesty. You must be aware that Heero did not inform us that he had contacted you. And you must then also be aware that Heero has taken more than a few unsolicited and unexpected actions lately.'

Three pairs of eyes turned cautiously to him. Winner was the leader, even in his current state, and it was to him that Zechs looked. It earned him a nod. 'Yes,' Winner answered. 'He told us the truth.'

'Then you know that your presence here is a complication.'

'A turn on a theme.' Winner's smile was a jagged up-tick. 'Heero said this rogue Prev-- Prev--'

'Preventer,' Barton supplied quietly.

'Resents the influence of the Gundam Pilots,' Winner finished. 'So let's show him that influence. Let him see us. Four of us here by Relena's side should tip the balance.'

'And the consequences--'

'Are ours,' Chang said.

'To the Princess,' Zechs corrected. 'There are political consequences to being seen with you. She's already risked enough in bringing Heero here. She can't afford to make Sanq a refuge for all Gundam Pilots.'
'Can't she?' Chang opened his coat. Not a few Preventers in the room twitched at that, but Chang dismissed them with a lazy wave of his hand. He removed a thick envelope in diplomatic bindings from his inner pocket. 'The Premier of Lagrange Point Five sends his greetings and his gratitude to the Princess Relena Peacecraft of Sanq for her long years of friendship with the Colonies, and expresses his hope that her brave and public embrace of amnesty will be a shining example to the Earth-Sphere's leadership.'

That was no joke. Zechs was no politician, either, but he knew exactly how much that was worth, if that document Chang held really did say that. And Barton and Winner were both producing similar bundles. He extended his hand. Chang and Winner surrendered theirs immediately; Barton made him reach for it, but they all had the appropriate seals, looked official. Zechs examined them each as carefully as he could without cutting the ribbon binding them.

When he looked up, he nodded to Cobra. 'Get in contact with your partner. Keep lockdown in place-- but get the Princess in here.'

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Relena finished reading by taking off her glasses and setting them aside. Her fingers lingered in place on the middle of the three documents, each lined up along the table in colony order. The Preventers in the room watched her tensely, not daring to interrupt her study, but each of them had touched their weapons at least once in each long minute it had taken her to survey the documents.

'Well?' Zechs asked finally.

'Wait,' Spider said, and made a show of crossing his chest in the sign of the cross. 'Now.'

Troyes stood, taking place behind Relena's chair. He rubbed her shoulders gently. She smiled wearily at him.

'It's a narrow path,' she said. 'The language is vague enough to be positive and broad enough not to have any real meaning. But one thing seems clear. It's not a form letter. The colonial governments knew this was happening, this specific event, the Gundam Pilots coming into Earth Space. There's no direct threats, but it's clear that arresting the Pilots would be taken as a hostile act. This is not a clandestine visit, even if it's not one taken with any actual authority.'

'Is that enough to ensure their freedom?' Neptune asked tentatively. 'Are Preventers...'

'We have no obligation to perform an arrest, until we have an order from Brussels,' Zechs answered. 'Which is not to say we'll be above criticism for failing to take action regardless.'

'And I can't afford to cushion you by providing you a counter-order,' Relena added. She tapped her glossy fingernails on the dossier from L3. 'The original indictment of the Pilots was issued in November of 195, before the end of the war. It was, however, inherited by the Provisional Government, and it was enacted by an executive order, not by Parliamentary vote. Technically it falls on the President to enforce the indictment against the remaining Pilots.'

'That's why there was such intensive manoeuvring to catch Duo and Heero in other illegal activity,' Cobra guessed. 'So they could be easily removed under the existing terms, but only with proof.'

'Yes,' Relena agreed. 'By the terms of their sentence they had strict parole requirements. But the
other Pilots don't. They weren't tried, even in absentia. They're technically free citizens, until the indictment is enforced. If the President chooses to enforce it.'

'Are you enjoined to report their presence?' Troyes asked then.

That was a salient question. 'Preventers aren't,' Zechs said slowly. 'At least not entirely. We have latitude in circumstances involving ongoing mission-related intelligence work and operations. But we have to answer for the reasons we don't report, and “I didn't want to” isn't an acceptable reason.'

'Exactly,' Relena said, and sighed. Troyes squeezed her shoulders, and she patted his hand. 'All of this said, I think I should meet with them. The rest of the Sphere will believe I did anyway, and I don't lose anything by giving them that courtesy, after they came all this way, at such risk to themselves.'

If he didn't know exactly how Preventers ought to act, he did know what he had to say about Heero, and he knew too that his sister was not going to like it. 'Heero can't meet them,' Zechs told her. 'You know he can't. That is a violation of his sentence. Contacting them at all was a violation.'

Relena was silent for far too long for his comfort. There was a growing jut to her chin that was more than familiar to him; he saw in the mirror all too often. She was going to say no.

Or it could be infinitely worse.

'Maybe it's time they all got used to seeing him at my side no matter what I'm doing,' she said. 'They won't have any choice about it when we're married.'

Zechs had to suck in air just to keep himself from imploding. 'Married?' he repeated, when he could speak without shouting. He was proud of his level tone.

'He asked me,' Relena said. There was a delicate flush in her pale cheeks, but that stubborn jaw dared him to provoke her. 'Last night.'

'I see. And you don't think the timing is suspect?'

If he could have taken that back, he would have, if only for the sudden uncertainty in her eyes. He'd put that doubt there, made her wonder if Heero were only using her to get the Gundam Pilots on Earth with her royal power. Even if it were true, he should have never said it to her.

'Relena,' he sighed, and rose to take her in his arms. She resisted him for a moment, but when he stroked her hair she let her head rest against his chest. 'Forgive me. That was unfair.'

'You're wrong about him.' Relena separated gingerly from his embrace. 'I don't ask for you to love him, Zechs. Only that you believe me when I tell you that he does love me.'

'I do believe that,' Zechs admitted reluctantly. 'I've seen more than enough of it to be sure of that. But marriage? Are you sure? Duo said you turned him down before.'

'I had growing up to do.' Relena smiled fondly at him. 'It was never that I didn't love him. But I was afraid I wasn't able to stand up without him. I think I've just finally realised that he needs me as much as I need him.'

Neptune cleared her throat, and the room expanded again to include his fellow Preventer and Troyes, who were not incurious about their exchange. Only Neptune knew that Relena was really his sister; Spider and Orange did not, and nor did Cobra or, for that matter, the innocent Troyes, and it would be quite a remarkable thing for a Preventer, even one in Relena's circle of friends, to
be quite so intimate with her. Not to mention what it did for his reputation as a cool-headed leader. First his involvement with Duo, now his tenderness with Relena. He would undermine himself before he even formally took the title of Deputy. Zechs took a careful step back, then another. He went to the window, to glance out over the lawn two flights below. Empty. Or so it appeared. But Tropic had to be out there.

'It's not that I disagree with the scheme,' he said reluctantly. 'It's the same premise as removing Duo from the picture so Tropic would focus on Heero. But I worry about the risk, to Sanq and to the Pilots.'

'We can worry or we can act,' Relena answered. She shrugged her slim shoulders. 'I don't see that we have all that much choice in the matter. They're here. If we had the option of stopping them at the border, that would be one thing, but that's not how it happened. I say we go full steam ahead.'

'Heero is definitely a bad influence,' Zechs said sourly.

But in the end that was the decision they made, and there really was no other way forward. Still, it was Relena's job to take political action, and Preventers' job to see that she did it with proper safeguards. They kept the palace in lockdown, all personnel, even Troyes, banned from the corridors. Outside, they kept the patrols going, stalking the garden walks in formation as if nothing had occurred. Deception would play a necessary part in this, the better to surprise Tropic when the time came. They'd have one shot at throwing him off his game, of outraging him so thoroughly that he'd be willing to jeopardise himself in order to confront them.

Given everything, the greetings exchanged between Relena and the Pilots were subdued. Chang, elegantly enough in his long robe, rose at her entrance and inclined himself in a bow. 'Princess,' he said, politely, if distantly.

'Beile,' she answered, returning his bow with one of her own. 'Welcome to my kingdom, and please forgive our caution in your reception. In these troubled times safety often takes the place of courtesy.'

'Not at all.' Faced with Relena's effortless charm, even Chang seemed mollified. He didn't go so far as to smile, but he did make a reasonably gracious gesture to introduce her to his friends. 'You recall my companions. Trowa Barton, Pilot of Gundam Heavyarms, and Quatre Winner, Pilot of Gundam Sandrock.'

'Interesting introduction,' Orange noted in undertone to Zechs.

'Yes,' Zechs agreed. 'Isn't it.'

'Of course I remember.' Relena offered a hand to Barton, who pressed it but released it quickly, regarding her impassively and straying no further than an inch from his partner. Winner, the warmest of the three, took both of Relena's hands in his, even rising up to kiss her cheek, though it was clear that he was not well-balanced on his feet and that both Barton and Relena moved to support him.

'Sanq is still as beautiful as I rem-remember,' Winner told her.

'Thank you, Quatre.' Relena drew a chair to his side, sweeping her skirt beneath her to sit. 'More beautiful without a war being fought inside its borders. But that's why you're here, I see.'

'I hope not a war.'

'We more than hope,' Chang pointed out, leaving his post by the fireplace to stand near the
princess. He rested on spread feet, his hands clasped behind his back. 'Do I correctly take your presence here as an indication that you accept certain political illusions until we can resolve this situation?'

'I accept that we've reached a point of desperate measures.' Relena rested a hand on Winner's knee. 'Preventers are completely satisfied that this Agent Tropic wasn't complicit in what happened to you in the mines?'

'Not beyond taking advantage of our paranoia about it,' Barton said, the longest sentence Zechs had heard out of him yet. And it was bitterly spoken, soft words while his eyes lingered steadfastly on his lover. 'It's my fault. Heero being picked up by Immigration. I was trying to reach him, trying to get his help. I thought it must be connected and he was trying to find out. If Tropic was waiting for an opening, we gave him one. And because of what happened to Heero, he was able to get to Duo.'

'Stop it,' Winner said firmly. When Barton looked away, Winner sighed. 'If we begin blaming ourselves, then let's start with me. I knew Mavise was involved in Fr-- Fr-- FreeSpace and I was convinced it was Wealthy Trustee Syndrome. If I'd minded her radicalism I would have saved lives, much less spared Duo and Heero this ordeal.' He rubbed his eyes with a shaking hand. 'I'm sorry, could I have a glass of water?'

Chang fetched the glass that Zechs had poured before. He had to help Winner hold it. 'If we're going to blame anyone,' he said grimly, 'then may we please blame those who truly deserve it? The face-saving bastards who stranded Heero and Duo on this blighted planet to begin with, and this maniac who's trying to murder them here now.'

'What exactly do you think we can do about Tropic?' Relena asked. 'In all honesty, I'm not sure I believe we can startle him. He's already made his big move-- exposing himself by coming for Duo once. Will he really risk coming forward again without an escape route in place?'

'Not if he's smart,' Winner agreed, 'and I think we can agree that he is unfortunately smart. But Duo's removed his pawn. He doesn't have a son... son to take the dangerous risks.'

Chang set the water glass aside. 'As for big moves, that is where I believe our advantage lies. He's lost his job, his place in society, his son, yes. He'll let himself be forced out of hiding because he has nothing else to lose but his life, and his life is increasingly worthless. If we can tempt him to spend it in saving something he holds more dear than life--'

'Princess Relena,' Zechs said.

The three Gundam Pilots turned their eyes to him.

'Yes,' Winner said. 'All the threats were concerned with her safety and her corruption. Two Pilots in Brussels just associating with her were a threat. A Pilot in Sanq making a love match with her would be terrifying. Four Pilots is inconceivable. He'll try to stop it. And if we want to stop him, then we have to provide him a carefully constructed avenue of approach. We give him one way in, and no way out.'

'I want him alive,' Relana interrupted bluntly. 'And I want to be very clear with all of you that I will not tolerate euphemisms or lies or pretty deceptions. I want Tropic alive. I think the best approach is not to present him with a threat and a trap, but a threat and an offer. Let him see you here. And then give him the chance to come say his piece. If he wants it badly enough, he'll come even under threat of arrest.'

'He will hardly believe he'll only be arrested after what he's done,' Chang scoffed.
'He'll believe it if I give my word.' Relena stood. 'You gentlemen can talk all you like. You do have my hospitality, and I hope that you enjoy it while you stay. But this is my home, and my kingdom, and for just this once, gentlemen, you'll do things my way.' She smiled brightly, but there was steel in it. 'Now, then. Is anyone hungry?'

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'You should have stayed on colony,' Barton whispered. 'You're not well enough for this.'

'It had to be all of us.' Winner leant his cheek against the window pane. His eyes were closed, but lines of strain creased his pale forehead. Barton's hand on the small of his back stroked tenderly. 'We discussed it. We agreed.'

'You bulldozed us,' Barton corrected him.

Winner's mouth eased into a smile. His eyes slitted open. 'You let me,' he answered.

Barton bent his head to rest it against Winner's. 'It could still be dangerous. Remember what you promised. No convenient “I forgot”s.'

'Absolutely none.'

Zechs cleared his throat. Barton turned toward him, and, after a deep breath, so did Winner.

'We've got rooms for you,' Zechs told them. 'Mr Chang has already been shown to his. If you'd follow me, I can also let you in on our security arrangements for your stay.'

'Thank you.' Winner took his lead, steps dragging. Barton was his silent shadow, wary now in Zechs' presence. Though Zechs was sure that the two had noted much of what he pointed out, he noted the window alarms and the motion-sensors on the lawn, the security cameras both indoors and out. 'And the Princess is safe?' Winner asked.

'No place this big is impregnable,' Zechs admitted reluctantly. 'But once inside here Tropic would never be able to reach her. She's guarded at all times. And... I believe Heero would die to protect her.'

'He'd kill first,' Barton murmured.

'You heard the Princess.'

'Preventers do not and cannot take orders from Sanq,' Winner noted.

'No,' Zechs said. 'But it's not an unreasonable request.'

'Isn't it?' Winner asked him soberly. 'Pargan and his son are bo—both dead on his account. We'd be fools not to expect one last act of violence. He's a desperate man now.'

Zechs halted at the head of a bright little hall just past the small orangery. 'I might admit that I personally hope he makes a rash move. But for the Princess' sake, let us publicly hope that he comes in unarmed and leaves under arrest with no delay between.' He gestured. 'Your suite is the first door. Mr Chang is just to the left.'
To his surprise, Winner reached the distance between them, and pressed his wrist. It was only a brief touch, but it was the kind of touch that passed between friends, not between men who were barely acquaintances. Yet they were more than that. They had Duo between them, and they had this grim adventure. However it ended.

'Rest while you can,' Zechs told them. 'And please listen to me very closely on this. You cannot have contact with Heero while you're here. It would be far too dangerous for him. Even if you think it's a silly fiction, it's a fiction we must maintain, or everything he and Duo sacrificed in Brussels could be for nothing.'

'We understand.' Barton took the door, and held it for Winner. But when Barton would have gone in, he stopped, and looked back at Zechs.

'A bit of return advice,' he said shortly. 'If I were you, I'd avoid casual conversation with Wufei. I don't think he's got a lot to say to you that's going to be polite.'

Zechs inhaled slowly. 'I can imagine not. Thanks for that.'

Barton inclined his head. And closed the door in his face.

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'Short route from outside,' Zechs approved. 'I like that. I don't want Tropic parading through our defences. The room can be utterly secured?'

'Only one window, and we can take care of that from inside and out,' Spider replied, showing him on the blueprint. 'Access is one door, and I've had my boys adding a barricade. Here's my problem with the scenario.'

Zechs looked at his fellow agent expectantly. Spider chewed a bit of twisted paper, eying him back speculatively. 'Yes?' Zechs prompted him.

'Orders from the Princess,' Spider said. 'Figured I was to run them by you, but orders is orders. And you'll see for yourself why it's a problem.' He lifted a page from his folder and handed it over.

In Relena's elegant script, phrased disingenuously as a 'request', it was a problem indeed. 'Table and chairs,' Zechs said aloud, incredulous at even repeating it. 'She wants them all to sit down to tea?'

'Civilised diplomacy,' Spider noted wisely.

Zechs tossed the paper away to the table. 'She's out of her mind.'

'You said it, Boss, not me.'

He planted his hands flat on the table. 'We've tried to accommodate her wishes, but this-- get Yuy in here. Without the Princess.' He reached for his mobile, and dialled Sally.

She answered swiftly-- she'd been waiting for his call. 'We're close?' she asked immediately.

'Close,' Zechs said. 'We're working on set-up, and then we'll put out the broadcast. After that it's just a countdown until Tropic either takes the bait or bails.'
'This is nerve-wracking.'

'Extremely.' Zechs scratched vigorously at his skull. 'So far the Pilots are playing nice, but Relena isn't. She wants to bring Tropic in for diplomatic talks.'

'I'm sorry, it sounded an awful lot like you said “diplomatic talks”.'

'I did. A formal sit-down so he can rant at length.'

'Does she think there's an endpoint to negotiating with this man?'

'I'm about to yell at her. I suppose I'll find out. My gut says no, but she wants to observe the form of it anyway. I think she's feeling bruised by how this has played out, and this is her way of restoring the rules.'

'Given the way her life has been the last decade, I can understand that.' Sally sighed. 'Don't be too hard on her, Zechs. She went out on a limb for this. If we can keep her safe and still do it her way, that's our job.'

He'd needed the reminder. He was tired, bodily and mentally, and it wasn't going to get easier in the next however-many-hours it took for Tropic to come in. He might need Relena to give in on something worse than a table and a few chairs. The better he behaved himself now, the better chance he'd have of winning her cooperation later.

'I'll check in again soon,' he told his commander, and hung up.

Spider was back shortly, and in his wake came Heero Yuy. If Sanq was wearing Zechs to the bone, it seemed to be reinvigorating Yuy. The paranoia and grimness that had marked him in Brussels was still there, but there was life in his eyes now too, a quickness in his step. At least someone was benefiting. Duo would have been happy to see it.

That thought was the only one that brought him any ease. Duo would have been happy about it. Duo loved his friend, and for that, if for nothing else, Zechs should be glad. He would remember to tell Duo, when this was over.

That made him less gruff than he might have been when he showed Heero Relena's note. 'Were you aware of this?' he asked.

Heero read it in a glance. 'I told her it was a bad idea. I thought that meant she wouldn't do it.'

Spider snorted his amusement. Heero shot him a sour look. Zechs buried a grin.

'Well, she's done it, so let's figure out how to make it work,' Zechs said. 'Having Relena seated behind a table is a risk, but it's not insurmountable. A long table, positioned lengthwise down the room. Tropic would have to be seated here, nearest the door.'

'Barricaded door,' Spider added. 'At least he won't be running anywhere.'

'No, he'll be trapped in the room with the Princess and a potential weapon. Can we get chairs that nail to the floor?'

'The Historical Commission won't let us damage the floorboards,' Zechs levelled a long look at his fellow Preventer. Spider only shrugged. 'I don't make the rules,' Spider said. 'They're original Finnish birch.'
'Lightweight plastic chairs,' Heero said abruptly. 'They have some in storage. They use them for concerts. The backs break away from seats and they don't weigh more than two pounds each. They'd be relatively useless as weapons.'

Zechs nodded slowly. 'That's a good option. Under the circumstances. Any plastic tables?'

'I can dig one up,' Spider promised.

'All right, that gets us past the set-up. I don't want a beverage set in there. Ceramics mean breakables and tea means hot liquids. I think if the Princess wants the courtesy we can stay with our plastic theme and compromise; I'm willing to provide paper cups and water. Now. Let's discuss how we're going to film this broadcast.'

'What's to discuss?' Heero said.

That struck Zechs as purposefully naïve, and he let it pass with effort. 'You know the restrictions on your interaction with the other men. We're going to have to handle this carefully.'

'Relena said she took care of it when she transferred my asylum rights to Sanq.'

'Only partially. The terms of your parole still apply, and those preclude contact with your fellow Gundam Pilots.'

'They're not,' Heero said, tonelessly and quietly. 'None of us have Gundams anymore. We destroyed them, and we've lived public lives because we were made to. Duo tried. Quatre tried. Look what it's done to them.'

As he'd done the first day they'd met again in Brussels, Zechs faced him simply and directly. 'You know what I mean, Heero,' he said. 'You can't be part of this the way they will be.'

'I won't leave Relena alone.'

'You can't legally be in the room.'

'Then find a way. They let us be together in Brussels.'

'I take it you made it very clear there was no way to keep the two of you apart in Brussels. Anyone who's ever been near the two of you would understand that.' Zechs tapped the blueprint. 'Preventers can't buffer you. Pieter Van den Broeck can't buffer you. You can't be in that room.'

'As Heero Yuy,' he retorted. 'As Relena's fiance, I have different rights--'

'No, you don't. There's no legal status for engaged, and if you think I'm going to stand here and let you drag her into a rushed marriage for your own selfish purposes, you haven't even begun to test my mettle, Yuy.'

'I—' Yuy stared down at the table darkly. He squared his jaw. 'I wouldn't do that to her,' he said softly. 'But I can't protect her if I'm not there.'

'Asking you to trust me to protect her is beyond the pale, I suppose. Heero, you can't do this anymore. Running off after Duo and hiding Arni Olsen's body was the last straw. You can't flout the law just because it's not fair and you don't like it. If nothing else, you have to be convinced by now that you're not the one who's suffering for it. Who's going to be in trouble if you push it? Your three friends, who could be stranded here on Earth without the legal protections you've been given. Duo, whose options are going to depend entirely on how successful we are in netting Tropic. You
need to *behave*, Heero.'

He gave Heero the time it took him to get to acceptance of that. It was all the kindness he could give, but he owed it. He knew when Heero's eyes dipped closed that he'd won real agreement. Knew, too, that Heero had already worked it out for himself, but had needed to hear it all the same. For himself, Zechs didn't know if he would have stayed standing still if he'd heard trouble and known he could help, if only he could be there. He didn't blame Heero for trying.

And when he accepted that, himself, he gave up being angry at Heero for the mess that had resulted. It didn't make the mess disappear, but it wasn't Heero's fault any more than it was Duo's or Winner's or Barton's. They'd all been targeted, and they'd all done what they could to survive. That was all that had to be said, could be said, about it.

Heero dragged a finger down the tissue edge of the blueprint. 'The parole orders define “contact” as “close interaction”. That's why they excluded Duo from it. They couldn't confine us to the same city and reasonably prevent close interaction without actually jailing us. I can be in the room with the others if I avoid interacting directly with them.'

'That's the only parameter set by the orders? They didn't use any specifics about proximity or middle-man contacts?'

'Not specifically.'

'I'm not sure that gives us actual legal cover. It could come down to a legal argument, and that means a court and a judge, and I don't personally want to invite that circumstance.'

Heero bunched his shoulders, and released them. He rolled his head, bones cracking. 'Duo is more patient with this bullshit,' he muttered.

'Yes,' Zechs agreed. 'He is. It must have come from all that experience with your trial and the work at Small Arms.' He pushed his hair back again. He wanted for a long, hot shower. Soon. 'Did he-- did Duo have to get any kind of waiver to work with Small Arms?'

'What?' Heero looked sharply at him. 'I don't know. I didn't like to talk about it.' He grimaced. 'I should have paid attention.'

'No time to worry about that now. Spider, can you contact someone for me? A barrister in Brussels, Belgium. Pieter Van den Broeck. He's the president of a non-governmental group called--'

'Small Arms, heard you,' Spider said, making a note for himself. 'How do you spell Broeck?'

'I want to know if Duo Maxwell needed and how he got any legal waivers for work with a group whose sole purpose is rehabilitation of soldiers. I'm sure it would have rubbed wrong against his parole orders in some way. There has to be an active military component with Small Arms, even if it's not a direct contribution, and that would have required legal wrangling. Let's get details on that. It might be useful for us. And ask Van den Broeck if he has any updates on Maxwell? Anything at all.'

'Will do.'

'Will this work?' Heero asked him.

'If not, we're running out of ideas.'
Troyes manned the camera, a tiny little thing on a tripod that had dozens of minute settings that required careful tinkering and frequent repositioning. Zechs hovered impatiently for several minutes, then gave up on it as a bad business and took himself across the room to his sister and the Gundam Pilots instead.

They were a spruce-looking bunch. As staged theatre went, this would be an interesting show. Relena wore the uniform of state, Sanq's royal colours and even a demure tiara to indicate her rank, as if she didn't have one of the most famous faces in the Sphere. It was unusual to see her in such attire; in fact, Zechs couldn't remember it in recent years, outside of her appearance at rare royal functions. For political reasons Relena had publicly preferred to avoid the anachronistic dress that recalled Romafeller's noble abuses and the old fallen regimes of aristocratic privilege. For personal reasons, being a modern young woman, she preferred simple and professional suits, hair long hair pulled back, not brushed full and shining over her shoulders as it was now. But she was beautiful, and Zechs smiled proudly at her.

The young men standing with her made a handsome portrait as well. Chang was the most striking, in his traditional costume. Zechs had had to discreetly look up the title Relena had used for him, Beile. It was unfamiliar because it was centuries out of use, like much of the culture that had transported to space with the clans of Lagrange Point 5. Chang Wufei, the direct if many, many times removed descendant of a long-dead emperor, was a proper lord, a son of a prince. The title itself was more gallantry than accuracy, however. All claims to properties and rights had been wiped away by the Long Clan's self-immolation during the war. No small wonder that Chang had travelled so far for his friends, and risked so much even now. Family was family, even in these peculiar circumstances.

Barton and Winner were no more than a handclasp apart, of course. Zechs was already used to seeing it. They looked very right together, a tall and fit couple. Their suits were subtly complimentary, Winner's with a lavender pinstripe to match Barton's tie. But Winner did not look well. He was noticeably pale, and his eyes wandered distractedly.

'We're nearly ready,' Zechs told them. 'I trust everyone's properly revised their lines.'

'We're not actors, but I think we can be counted on,' Chang said drily. 'Quatre, you're not looking very clever. Sit down before you fall down.'

'I'm fine,' Winner said, even as he wiped sweat from his brow. 'Can I-- I-- Trowa?'

'I'll get a chair,' Barton murmured, and went for it. Chang smoothly assumed Barton's position, taking Winner by the arm and providing him balance and support without drawing undue attention to it.

'I've had news about Duo,' Zechs said then. The Pilots and Relena alike turned keen on that. Barton, bringing the chair, attended closely. 'His lawyer, Pieter Van den Broeck, told us that Duo's been moved to solitary confinement.'

'Solitary?' Relena repeated. 'Is that normal treatment?'

'I wouldn't think normal, no. He wasn't able to determine if there was any kind of precipitating incident, and I haven't had the opportunity to follow up on it yet. But solitary is not the worst place for Duo right now.'
The Pilots exchanged looks between them, solemn expressions worn by men who'd all experienced exactly that kind of imprisonment, and knew more than Relena or, indeed, Zechs, what it meant, what it felt like.

'He's safe,' Zechs said. 'That's the important thing.'

Winner sat when Barton pressed him down by the shoulder. 'Safe,' he echoed. 'Yes. That's imp—important.'

A knock at the door announced the arrival of Neptune and Spider with Heero. Zechs took a deep breath, and turned back to his sister. 'Are you sure?' he asked her, one final time.

He knew before she even answered. Her eyes had locked to Heero's face, as if the rest of the world had disappeared as soon as he entered. He knew without looking that Heero would be staring back at her.

'Yes,' Relena said, almost dreamily. 'I'm sure.'

Heero joined them. Barton shook his hand, and so did Chang, but as Zechs had thought, he only had eyes for Relena, and as soon as his hands were free, they were taking hers, his big rough fingers impossibly gentle curling around Relena's small white ones. Heero raised them to his lips, and then he took her in his arms, pressing a tender kiss to her temple. They looked right together, too, Zechs thought, feeling a little pang.

'And this is all legal?' Chang asked.

'Tentatively,' Relena answered, tearing her gaze away from Heero reluctantly. 'It was Zechs' idea. Mr Van den Broeck secured a waiver for Duo when he brought Duo into Small Arms for counselling. Technically that's what we're trying here, although we're galloping ahead of the actual waiver application. Zechs thinks because it's a well-established investigation and because Preventers are so deeply involved, we can bring Heero in as a legal exception to the no-contact ruling. As for what happens later...'

'We'll make the most of it,' Winner said.

Heero put a hand on his shoulder. Barton covered it, and so did Chang. They nodded as one.

'The camera is ready,' Troyes announced. 'Whenever you want to start, Relena.'

Zechs stepped away. He joined his fellow Preventers by the door. Neptune gave him a smile, and he nudged her shoulder with his. Spider propped an unlit cigarette over his ear and settled in to watch.

'History in the making,' Neptune whispered.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'Don't you feel privileged?'

Spider chuckled. 'Not as privileged as I'll feel when I slap the cuffs on my old friend Tropic.'

'I'll drink to that,' Neptune grinned.

'Recording,' Troyes said.

Relena stood centre to the four pilots. Winner, standing now and supported by Barton's body right at his side, was placed directly beside her, to make the visual point that the colonial Pilots had not
just arrived but were well established with Relena. Heero stood to her left, and Chang beside him. It was a deliberately composed portrait, framed by one of the most recognisable windows in Malmö, a ten-foot stained glass depicting the first royal Parliament in Kalmar, four generations ago. Assuming Tropic hadn't missed them coming in, given the show they'd made of it, then he would know that window for sure, especially if he really was a Sanqian as they suspected. To the rest of the world, it would act as a marker of their seriousness, and that was all that mattered.

'My name is Relena Peacecraft,' she began. 'I speak today as the Princess Royal of Sanq, and as a woman who is proud to be friend to the men I stand with. These men were once known as the Gundam Pilots, who represented the Resistance during the Colony War and who defended this kingdom, my kingdom, with their lives when we opened our borders to refugees. In recompense for that brave act I promised my loyalty, and today I am repaying it. Today I speak to the Sphere to say that I have welcomed these men who were once Gundam Pilots to my home and to my confidence.

'I risk little myself in this act beyond censure for flouting etiquette and tradition. The risk to these men is greater. By coming to Earth, they risk arrest, imprisonment. The loss of freedom and livelihood. And yet even their risk in coming to my side is small when we look beyond the personal. For too long we have swept aside the consequences of the war. In our haste to rebuild, in our hurry to move on, have we failed to ask questions which cause us pain? Have we failed to look too closely at wounds which healed imperfectly, and now must be reopened? And so I turn to these men for counsel, for wisdom, for their experience and their aid.'

'As we look to Earth,' Winner began, his voice breathy with the effort, 'as we open-- open our eyes to a new era-- Cooperation becomes the sole-- sole tool with which we all begin equally. The Colonies-- Colonies have sent us as rep-- representatives to speak to anyone who wishes to be heard.' He produced the diplomatic document he'd brought from L4, raising it for the camera, and the other Pilots mimicked him. 'Thank you, Princess, for welcoming us to your kingdom.'

'I speak for the United Clans of Lagrange Five,' Chang said. He spoke rather haughtily, but given the point of their broadcast, it wasn't misplaced attitude. 'And more than that, I come to listen. Thank you, Princess, for opening a dialogue.'

'I speak for Lagrange Three,' Barton said, quieter than the other two, but loud enough for the camera. 'Thank you, Princess, for the opportunity to talk.'

'To any who would join us,' Relena finished, 'you are welcome.'

Zechs blew out a long breath. 'And it's done,' he said. 'Now we wait.'
Exactly twenty-three hours after the broadcast ran on every channel they could buy, Tropic came in.

Zechs was amongst those waiting at the gate, his rifle propped to his shoulder and his red laser sight steady on Tropic's torso. His one-time partner looked the worse for wear, though he was treated with efficiency rather than roughness, held face-down on the quartz gravel before the main house and stripped nude. Neptune had won the coin-toss with Spider, and she was the one who bound Tropic's hands behind his back with a plastic tie. She and Spider hauled him upright by the arms and marched him into the shelter of a tent Preventers had set up on the lawn, where further scans could be carried out in security.

Zechs tapped the out-going communique at his ear and said, 'Subject is in. Repeat, subject is in.'

'Good work,' Sally said shortly. 'Keep me posted.'

'Yes sir.' Zechs swept the lawn with the long-range scope of his rifle. They'd never been able to rule out the possibility that Tropic had allies other than his son, but nothing so much as a breeze stirred the long empty lane that led to Malmö's front door. 'Satellite check?' he demanded.

'No unusual heat signatures,' Mamba replied. 'Halls are clear in here. Lock-down will continue until we have your word.'

Tropic was stood centre-stage when Zechs ducked under the plastic sheeting of the security tent. Beneath his feet was a mat strewn with dozens of cables, and Neptune scanned him with a hand-held wand set to highest sensitivity. Hydra sorted his clothes on a table, ripping out seams with a knife and running all of it through the portable x-ray. Tropic had chosen everything with care, a long-sleeved tee with no buttons, jeans with the pockets ripped off. Even his coat and shoes were designed to do nothing beyond keeping the weather out. His only possession beyond that was dog tags. Zechs donned a latex glove to pick them up, rubbing his thumb over the stamped letters.

'These aren't yours,' he said, dropping them into the plastic bowl Hydra offered. 'We know you're not Ferrins Meijer.'

'You can return those to his family,' Tropic answered shortly. There was no dignity in a cavity search, though Spider directed him this way and that with nothing but cool instructions and brisk indifference. Tropic's face was tight as he spread his legs wider, bent by Spider's hold and held there awkwardly as Spider finished his work.

'Then he is dead. Meijer. You knew him?' Zechs asked.

'Died in a field hospital. Buried in the mass grave outside Lucerne.'

'Probably relocated by now,' Neptune murmured to Zechs. 'Almost all the European sites were identified for reburial. Probably one of a thousand unknown, wherever he was laid.'

'And you were present at his death?' Zechs pursued. 'Were you in the Order of the Zodiac?'

He had to wait as Spider conducted a thorough examination of his throat and mouth, probing each tooth with a pick and a camera. Hydra helped with that, too, calling out old silver fillings for especial examination.
'Medic,' Tropic replied when Zechs repeated the question, some minutes later. He was shivering with the cold now, but none of his former colleagues offered to cover his nakedness. He bore it with grim stoicism. 'Volunteer. Not army.

'Then why assume his identity?'

'I didn't. Not immediately. I found the tags in a shoebox in the Lucerne War Archives. When I checked into his story, it seemed viable. October of 196.'

About nine months after the close of hostilities. Only a few months before the Barton Rebellion would hit Earth with a catastrophic reminder of how much could yet be lost. Zechs hadn't yet returned from Mars. Preventers were little more than a scrappy handful sustained by Une's money and connections, and their mobile suit operation had been as questionably legal as Barton's army of mercenaries. 'To what purpose,' Zechs asked then.

'I wouldn't have another opportunity if I waited much longer. The world was settling.'


'To what purpose,' Zechs said again. 'Why attempt to leave your old life behind. Or, rather, why only leave part of it. You kept in contact with your son.'

'Son,' Tropic said, and for the first time since walking that lonely road to the gate with his hands in the air, there was emotion on Tropic's face, ugly contempt. 'A broken condom,' Tropic said plainly. 'A mistake.'

'Not a long-term plan?' Neptune wondered coolly. With the last scan completed, she secured Tropic with a mag-lock manacle at the left wrist and sliced through the plastic tie. She and Spider dressed the man, light cotton trousers and a sack-like shirt with short sleeves. Socks on his feet, not shoes. 'Did you know your girlfriend had any relation with the Peacecraft family?'

'Of course he did,' Spider answered for him. He tied the drawstring in the trousers at Tropic's hip and snapped the second manacle in place, leaving Tropic bound again, but with his hands before him this time. He bent to add a tracker anklet and activated it with the press of a button. 'By then the whole Sphere knew Relena Dorlian was Relena Peacecraft. You knew by then that Miles Pargan--'

'Yes, I knew by 196,' Tropic interrupted. 'You always have talked too much, Henri. I was in school with Bara as children. I knew her father had been employed in the palace. There was no Sanq Kingdom when we got drunk in the back of her father's car during a school dance. As I said. It was a mistake. There was no conspiracy.'

'You know he's dead,' Zechs said.

'My son killed him, yes.'

'And Duo Maxwell killed your son.'

They were all watching. Perhaps because they were, Tropic let nothing to his face, if, indeed, he felt anything at all. 'I assumed it was him,' he said, eyes flicking to Zechs. 'You wouldn't have let them cart your little catamite to prison if you could get him off for murder.'

If Tropic could be emotionless, Zechs could be granite. He didn't respond to that. At all.
'Are we done with this?' Tropic asked then. 'I'll answer all your pointless questions later. I want to see the Princess.'

"By all means," Zechs replied icily. He touched his communique. 'Subject on the move,' he reported. 'We're ready.'

**

It was a strange tableau that awaited them.

The room was as Zechs had planned it to be. A plastic table with folding chairs, only one of which was unoccupied. It was nearest to the door, and Zechs planted Tropic in it himself, before retreating a step and training his rifle on Tropic's back. Neptune took his other shoulder, and Spider went across the room to stand by his partner at Relena's side. Zechs waited for the confirmation via his communique that the corridor was sealed off.

'We're secure,' he told everyone listening on the line, and in the room.

Relena accepted that with a nod. She didn't wear her finery, not here, but rather a thick jumper of rose pink that concealed the bullet-proof vest Preventers had insisted she wear. Her hands were folded on the table, and her hair was coiffed away from her face, leaving her clear eyes and soft mouth unadorned. Tropic's gaze was locked on her. If he even saw the Pilots arrayed, two on either side, it didn't show.

'Thank you,' Relena said. 'There has been enough violence. Your coming here is a sacrifice, I understand. I promise now to hear you out.'

'Princess.' Tropic inhaled deeply, shakily. 'I would bow, but...' 

'Stay seated,' Neptune ordered.

'Would you like water?' Relena asked him. 'I can swear by it.'

'Thank you. Yes.'

Troyes poured. First for the Princess, giving her the cup directly, and then for Heero and Chang Wufei. For Tropic, the boy set the cup carefully on the table, in reach, but in a position which allowed Troyes to skitter back readily when Tropic finally moved for it. He served Barton and then Winner, stooping low to exchange a quiet whisper. Winner was grey-faced and he trembled.

'I believe we must begin with the basics,' Relena said. 'I know you've gone by another name for some time. Perhaps you'd tell me your real name?'

Tropic did not hesitate. He curled his manacled hands about the paper water cup. 'I was born Latham Ohlsen. Of no particular parentage.'

'In Sanq?'

'In Sanq. As it was.'

Tropic wasn't making it easy. Lesser men had been tongue-tied in Relena's presence, however, and she gamely prodded him along, no sign on her serene face that she found it difficult. 'It was a
terrible time,' she said. 'Though I remember very little of it, I've spoken to many citizens who do. Pargan--' She wobbled just slightly on his name. 'He shared many disturbing stories with me. My mother, my adoptive mother, as well.'

'I remember the fires,' Tropic said. He sipped abruptly, and then drained his cup in one go. 'And the bomb crews. My father lost his legs. Unexploded ordnance. It killed hundreds. He malingered.'

'I'm sorry,' Relena said simply.

'He was just a man,' Tropic shrugged. He gazed at her, his chest rising and falling in slow deep breaths. 'My mother had a plate. One of those kitsch things. The Royal Wedding. I still have it. I would have liked for you to have it. Perhaps when this is over, the Preventers will allow that.'

'Wasting time,' Cobra said.

Tropic glanced at them. His former colleagues, none of whom were sympathetic to sentiment at the moment. 'In a rush?' Tropic asked her archly.

'If you have nothing other than banal chatter, I think we can wrap up early,' Zechs told him.

'You know, you were the greatest disappointment.' Suddenly Tropic was focussed on him. 'Perhaps my expectations were too high. I thought there was some great secret to it. White Fang. Libra. Preventers. I thought it meant something. But it doesn't, really, does it? It doesn't really meaning anything at all. You're just a man.'

Zechs felt heat in his face. His colleagues didn't break stance to look at him, too disciplined for that, but Tropic was awfully close to saying things that would be irrevocable for Zechs. His colleagues didn't look, but Relena did, and he saw her hesitation.

Whether or not Tropic meant to push it, it wasn't to be. Troyes, from his station along the wall, suddenly and sharply interrupted. 'Mr Winner,' he said.

Zechs risked a look. Barton was whispering low and fast to his partner. Winner's lips were blueish. His hands were shaken with tremors. Troyes left his spot at Relena's shoulder to crouch at Winner's chair. 'M'fine,' Winner told them. 'S'allri.'

'He's slurring,' Troyes said. 'Agent Merquise, I am afraid we need medical assistance.'

'Iss all righ,' Winner tried.

'His eye.'

That was Tropic. Zechs glared, but when he took a look for himself, he saw it. The left eyelid was definitely sagging.

'Quat.' Barton was on his feet and dragging Winner with him. Zechs saw immediately that he meant to get Winner out of the room, and cursed the timing. He didn't want a secure room swarming with medical, but neither did he want to send anyone out with Barton, not when the number balance had been so carefully thought out. More, losing Winner, and of course Barton would go with him, that was half the crowd of Gundam Pilots, half of the entire strategy against Tropic.

'I will go,' Troyes said. He didn't wait for permission, but slung Winner's arm over his shoulders. 'Is the door clear, Agents?'
Zechs nodded his gratitude for the boy's quick action. 'I'll have a team meet you.'

Tropic's head turned to follow their progress to the door; Barton sank slowly back into his chair. Chang murmured something to Yuy, who was stone-faced.

Almost lazily Tropic said, 'You do realise you've just sent the Gundam Pilot out there with a spy.'

Relena resumed her own seat, smoothing her skirt. 'I need no spies, Mr Ohlsen.'

'No, Princess, not your spy. He's colonial.'

Zechs lowered the muzzle of his weapon an inch. 'There is no way you'd know even if that were true.'

'Wouldn't I?' Tropic jerked his chin at Heero. 'Ask him. He's been passing messages for at least three years.'

'You came all this way to lie about Troyes Lefèvre?'

'The Princess has never been safe. From the very beginning. The moment her identity broke, forces the Sphere over converged to try and control her. Order of the Zodiac tried to kill her. Romafeller tried to use her. The Colonials-- well. They settled for getting someone near her. Someone who had reason to be at her side day and night.'

Now it was Relena who was pale. 'He was investigated,' she said.

'By Preventers as well, when you started threatening the Princess,' Zechs added. 'His background checks out.'

'Of course it does. The Colonials have had people on Earth long enough to grow an entire second generation of sleeper agents. Isn't that right, Mr Yuy. He's the one who facilitated your contact with the other Gundam Pilots, yes?'

Troyes had given Yuy a plane. Had got him to Duo in Germany. Because Duo had called Troyes.

Zechs touched his earpiece. 'Hold Troyes Lefèvre,' he said. 'Under no circumstances allow him out the door. Has medical arrived?'

'ETA ten minutes. I think Winner is stroking. Wait, Lefèvre?'

'You heard me. Arrest Lefèvre on sight. Get Winner ready for transport.' Barton, not privy to that exchange, stared at him with pinched mouth and storming eyes. Zechs avoided enlightening him, knowing he'd only go charging out of the situation where he was actually needed.

Relena sat with her fingers pressed to her lips. She didn't stop him, and he couldn't comfort her. Interrogation and investigation would prove Tropic's accusation true or false, but Zechs grimly noted that Yuy hadn't contradicted it. Another pawn sacrificed. And, he realised, too late, that he'd just opened the door to further arrests. If Barton, Chang, and Winner had used Troyes as a middleman, they were guilty by association. Shit. And Tropic had walked him right into it by playing on his fears for Relena.

'Wind it down,' he told his sister shortly. 'I think we've indulged this fantasy enough.'

'I have things to say,' Tropic overrode him. He made to stand, and every Preventer in the room levelled a weapon to inform him that was the wrong move. 'Your Highness. Please. You said
you'd hear me out.'

'I will.' She raised a hand to the Preventers, who would not obey her, but Zechs gave a cautious nod, and no-one moved.

'You are so young,' Tropic murmured. He sank slowly back into his chair. 'I don't imagine you're innocent. That you could be, given what you've been through. But I don't think I really knew it, how young you are. All of you.' He gazed at his clenched hands, bunching and releasing once, twice. 'Princess, I understand you must feel friendless and alone. Anyone would, in your situation, and it's no mistake you feel that way. You needed to stand alone, from the very beginning. Your value was in your potential to be influenced. To influence others. Others in your position--'  
Zechs, he meant, clearly, turning his eyes up to Zechs, his partner, his fellow Preventer. 'Milliardo Peacecraft chose a side and it drove him to ruin,' Tropic said harshly. 'Your wisdom was investing yourself in peace and peace alone. But you must remain strong, Princess.'

Yuy had some political instincts of his own. He used that moment to take Relena's hand, right atop the table. Tropic inhaled sharply.

Relena attempted to mediate it, though she didn't release Heero's hand. 'I'm only human, Mr Ohlsen,' she said, subdued. 'My strength isn't my solitude. No human's could be. My strength is my passion.'

'But your passion must be pure. What can Heero Yuy do but distract you? He has an agenda. You know this, you've resisted him for years because you know this. He's used your name again and again to keep himself in play for colonial interests. And colonial interests are not peaceful. How can you stand by his side and be believed when you say you want a Sphere at peace? He'll reduce you. No-one could trust your word with him standing beside you undermining your very existence. Passing intelligence about your activities to colonial spies. Even just distracting you. Ask that one how effective you can be with a Gundam Pilot dragging your attention away. Breaking your focus. You could be great, Merquise. But you don't even want to be. You'll waste your time and your potential for a few years of petty domestic bliss. We need more from you. We need all of you.'

'Even a servant of the state goes home for dinner every night,' Zechs sneered. 'And states come and go. I watched this kingdom fall once. It's no Platonic ideal. It's just a construct of treaties and elections and borders on maps. Even if she wanted to, Relena couldn't seal any of that in stone for time immemorial.'

'Not Sanq,' Tropic fired back, and then he was imploring Relena, not Zechs. 'Not Sanq, my lady. Peace.'

'You put a grave responsibility on my shoulders,' Relena said softly. 'I am only human, Mr Ohlsen, and I'm only one human at that. What if I fail?'

'Then we may never again have someone who cares as much as you do about getting it right.'

'Winner's crashing,' Hydra informed him. 'He's stopped breathing. Still no medical.'

Zechs shifted damp palms on his rifle. 'Heero Yuy,' he said. A dark head tippet toward him, and Zechs shook his head. 'No. Heero Yuy of the Colonial Pacifist Movement. Or does peace only count when it's a pretty blonde girl from Earth asking for it? Don't dress up your bigotry as something fancy for our sakes, Tropic. Tell me it has nothing to do with them being colonial. You called them monsters.'
'And aren't they?' Tropic snorted. 'What is it you think we do, Wind? What have we done in Preventers but clean up after decades of colonial aggression? FreeSpace were willing to cause immense suffering to protect a hunk of rock and ice. Those child prostitutes in Syria you were so concerned about, you think they'd exist without the wars that destroyed their homes, destroyed the rules that stop people from turning daughters into commodities? These boys in this room. Boys. Boys who've ended countless lives. Can they even count the numbers? Would they care if they could? They were made monsters by men who saw no problem with children murdering their way across Earth in death machines.'

'Monsters wouldn't care, no. So explain Duo Maxwell to me.'

'Maxwell,' Tropic dismissed him. 'This crush of yours is embarrassing.'

'You've watched him closely enough to know how he spends his time. Small Arms. What about the lives he's touched there, trying to give back? Children who believe they're monsters until someone like Duo tells them there's light at the end of the tunnel.'

'Children who wouldn't be there to be helped if he hadn't fought his wars.'

'And stopped fighting them. What about your son, Latham? What kind of monster would your son have been, if he'd been unleashed on a battlefield? Be glad the Gundam Pilots had the clarity of vision and the moral wherewithal to stop. Your son would still be out there bathing in blood for the thrill of it.'

'Good for us all that Maxwell killed him, then. I wonder what other problems he plans to solve with death.' Tropic shook his head. 'You are so blinded. You don't even see yet that he targeted you.'

Zechs felt a jolt at that. 'Targeted me. Check your timeline, Tropic. I never would have met him if not for your threats.'

'And how long did it take him to find the advantage in that? He cultivated you as an asset. He even managed to manoeuvre himself back into the Princess' circle, get Yuy back into her reach through you. Do you truly not see it? It's the very thing I was warning you against.'

Relena was pale. She said nothing, neither to agree nor defend herself. She did remove her hand from Heero's, ostensibly to reach for her water. But she didn't take his hand again after, and Yuy let it fall to his lap.

'Well,' Chang said. 'That was textbook. Thank you for the fine example. I missed being manipulated so blatantly.' He checked his wristwatch. 'We're approaching the dinner hour, and I prefer to keep a regular schedule. Princess, I hope by now you are convinced this is nothing but sturm und drang. Let us go free your Mr Lefèvre from Preventers' overcautious custody and check on Quatre.'

'Princess,' Tropic said urgently. 'Please. Please think on what I've said here. You have to ask yourself why they want to be near you. You have to be strong enough not to let them.'

'I will think about what you've said,' Relena answered dimly, only lifting her eyes to him for a moment. 'As I will think about what you did. To be quite honest, Mr Ohlsen, I don't see the logic between your crimes and your words about peace.'

'I'm only a man,' he said.

'I'm only a woman.'
'No. Or at least, of all of us, you could be more than that. But only if you rise above what broke the rest of us.' He sighed, his shoulders suddenly drooping from their tense lines. 'We need you to try.'

Zechs opened his communications line. 'Escort moving. Secure transport is ready? Good.' At his nod, Mamba and Neptune stepped in to bring Tropic to his feet. 'Get moving. I want him behind bars within the hour.'

'Merquise.' Barton stood. His heart was in his eyes, and it pained Zechs to lie directly to him.

'Waiting for an update,' he told the younger man. 'Medical are working on him.'

Neptune was frowning as she passed him by with Tropic. He shook his head minutely.

'Stay here,' Zechs told them all shortly. 'Orange, take the door. Lock down til I have Tropic off the property.'

They came back exactly the way they'd entered, giving Tropic no chance of unfamiliar corridors to run down, no open doors to duck into. He didn't try, and if anything seemed too absorbed in morose thoughts to even mind his guards. He turned where he was told and waited at the door when he was halted there, but his eyes were abstracted, turned inward, and his face had settled into sober lines. Zechs checked on the caravan of vehicles that would take Tropic to the nearby Preventers' facility and from there to a flight back to Brussels, and then he turned to face his one-time partner.

'Worth it?' he asked.

Tropic glanced up. He almost answered, then snorted. 'You don't even wonder if I'm right, do you. The possibility doesn't even bother you.'

'You aren't,' Zechs said coldly. 'Better men than you have tried.'

'To reach past that self-centred complacency? Doubtless.' Tropic breathed out something like a laugh. 'I feel sorry for you,' he said then. 'What your life must have been, to make you the man you are today. You won't believe this, but I wish better for you. Sanq deserves the kind of man your father was, and you could be that if you tried.'

Neptune stepped in, swiping her card over the reader they'd installed at the door and opening it wide. 'Subject on the move,' she said brusquely, and Mamba caught up a step behind as she moved Tropic through the scans. 'Car three.'

Zechs wet dry lips. Neptune had been right to interfere; he'd been a shallow breath away from counteracting with something that would have shattered the last of his fragile cover-identity. If they hadn't already, he was sure the rest of his team had started making guesses. He'd have to deal with that. But not right now.

He opened his line. 'Status on Winner,' he said, and turned away from the sight of Preventers loading one of their own into a van. They would have brought emergency response to the back loading dock, and that was where he went, kicking into a run and clattering down a wooden stairwell that bypassed the kitchens.

'Transient is- ischema attack?' was Hydra's response, stuttering on the unfamiliar word Zechs could hear repeated by someone unknown. 'No. Sorry. They thought-- look, we should-- we should get Barton out here--'
Malmö wasn't large enough to delay him at speed, and he was down the stairs and through the storage basement by the time Hydra stuttered to a stop. He swiped his card at another Preventers' security point and barged out into the bright grey light of day. Two ambulances and a half dozen with a scatter of equipment sprawled across the back drive; at its centre was Quatre Winner, being lifted into one of the vans, with a woman atop him performing something that looked like cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

'Stroke?' Zechs demanded of the one wearing a supervisor's badge on his shoulder.

'Thought it was a TIA, but it's probably brain stem,' was the grim response. 'We need to get on the road. Your agent said he's got a relation? We can bring him in the other van.'

The legality of that was questionable. He truly didn't know whether he could transport Barton anywhere. But, hell. If he didn't and Winner died-- decision made, he waved down one of the local Preventers who'd been stationed on perimetre. 'Get Trowa Barton,' he instructed. 'You,' he called the other, a tall blond man he thought he recognised; possibly the one who'd played escort for him the day he'd interviewed Pargan, months ago when this had all just been starting. 'Where did you put Lefèvre?'

'Second storey conference room. Two windows, but they're secured, and only one door. No furniture.'

'Good. I'll attend to that myself when this--' The siren on the ambulance with Winner cranked on, and he flagged it as a go-through for the gate.

He unsurprised, though hardly pleased, to find Relena at Barton's heels. She stayed in the shelter of the door, and he was even less surprised to see Yuy and Chang behind her, but Barton was the only one who came out, running for the second ambulance just as the first disappeared around the corner of the house. Zechs gave Hydra a boost into the van, and sent both the local Preventers in after him. 'I'll have another team meet you there,' he said. 'Under no circumstances do we lose sight of the Gundam Pilots. Keep me on the line.'

'Zechs?' Relena asked him when he trudged back. The second ambulance confined itself to flashing lights, no siren, but left skid marks in the gravel as it pulled out.

'I'm waiting on an update,' he said shortly. 'Get inside. Don't argue with me. I said lock down,' he growled at his Preventers. 'What about that was beyond you?'

'Tropic's off the property,' Orange said, unmoved. 'And you can't get people from one secure room to another without walking them between.'

'Then get them out of here, and no more side trips.'

Relena reached for his arm. 'Zechs. We just wanted to know--'

'Lock down,' Zechs ordered again. 'Now. And if I hear you gave them a contradictory order, Relena, or that these two take it into their heads to have a Sunday afternoon wander, I'll have them in holding next to Troyes Lefèvre. Move.'

It wasn't til he was alone in the hall that he took a deep breath. The acid taste of adrenaline was slow to fade, and he was parched. He hadn't ever returned the safety on his weapon. He did so then, and slung it on its strap to hang safely pointed down. He stripped the wire from over his ear and rubbed at the spot it had rested; they were always uncomfortable and he had the tell-tale headache that always resulted from too much white noise. He put it to his lips instead.
'Reporting in, Director,' he said. 'Tropic's on his way to you, Malmö is secure, and Quatre Winner is-- we need backup at the hospital for Quatre Winner and Trowa Barton.'

'On it,' Sally answered a moment later. 'Good work, Zechs.'

'I want every file that references Troyes Lefèvre.' He pushed damp hair back from his face. 'And I want the files on Heero Yuy's computers. And-- and every visit from Relena to Brussels during which she might have had contact with the Gundam Pilots. And don't--' This was the unforgiveable part, but he did his job and said it anyway. 'Don't pass the word on Duo Maxwell's release yet. If Lefèvre really is a colonial plant, then he and Yuy were in violation of their parole for years. Let's find out exactly what we're dealing with before we decide on action.'

'Agreed,' Sally said. 'Let me know what you need.'

'A stiff drink for starters.' He breathed. 'I'll be in contact.'
'I assure you, Agent Merquise,' Troyes Lefèvre said. He wrung his hands in his lap, but his face was composed, if tight around the eyes and jaw. 'I don't know what else to say for this. I am-- I am who I say I am.'

Zechs stared him down. He'd practised a stern stare to intimidate a generation of cadets, and even Noin was no match when he levelled that look. Troyes quailed, wilting visibly. Zechs just wasn't sure he believed that was a natural reaction.

Neptune was tapping her pen against her pad. 'Your parents are dead?'

The boy's eyes flicked to her. Zechs crossed his arms, and Troyes flinched. They'd kept him off balance, never sure which one of them to direct his answers toward. 'Oui,' Troyes said, then, 'Yes, I-- yes. My mother many years ago, mon père-- father-- in the war.' His English was fraying with every added stressor, but for all Zechs knew that was fake, as well, a clever detail to deepen the illusion. Duo had seen through both Tropic and Troyes, Zechs grimly recalled. Then again, he'd mellowed toward Troyes, at least enough to be grateful for Troyes' aid during the Árni Olsen disaster. Mere bonding in adversity? Conspiracies made his head ache. Treize had never mired him with too many secrets, so long as Zechs came out fighting when Treize pointed him in the desired direction.

'Can I please see Relena?' Troyes asked plaintively, his knuckles standing out white in his clenched fists.

'Where are your grandparents?' Neptune continued, as if she hadn't heard his question.

'They died before I was born. I never knew them.'

'They were French?'

'My grandfather, my mother's father, Martinique. Her mother, Lyon. Ah, my father's father, I think, Calais. I-- I don't know certainly.' He swallowed hard. 'I don't know my father's mother. This is not a thing I recall.'

'Mm,' Neptune said, writing on her pad, though Zechs could see over her shoulder she was scribbling rather than recording his answers. Troyes stared anxiously. All normal reactions for someone worried that the truth wasn't going to be enough to free him. Or a clever ruse to throw off an interrogation. Too many perfect replies would be suspicious, too.

'You tutored Relena in French?' Zechs asked then, striking a more casual tone, easing his stance until his shoulders touched the wall behind him. Troyes seemed to register the change with an uptick in misery, tracking the conclusion that they were only moving past facts in background investigations and onto more dangerous territory. Just bright and responsive? He was at Relena's side in politically charged situations daily, navigating a world in which body language could speak more directly than words. He saw a Preventers agent settling in for the long haul, not someone inclined to believe his story.

'Yes,' Troyes said, small-voiced. 'For advanced courses. Immersion. She taught me English, similarly.'

'When did you tell her you're gay?'
He started. 'Pardon?'

'When did you tell her you're gay,' Zechs repeated. 'I assume you've told her?'

Troyes turned pink. 'She found things in my drawer,' he whispered, fingers twining. 'Magazines and...' His cheeks flushed redder. 'Things for... things for sex with boys.'

'Condoms?' Zechs pushed, brutally ignoring the bounds of decency. Neptune added to the pressure by refusing to so much as blink. Troyes looked ready to melt through the floor. Even the tips of his ears were aflame.

'A--' Troyes breathed short distressed exhales. He couldn't look at either agent now. 'A toy for--' He made an aborted gesture, two fingers curling up. Then he wrapped his hands protectively against his gut, hiding them from the shame. That was the most believable yet, and Zechs tipped once again toward thinking Tropic had merely seen an opening and struck, lodging one more doubt just for the hell of it. Zechs caught Neptune's eyes, and tilted his chin out. She was chewing her cheek, and shrugged one shoulder. She was still undecided.

'When did you first meet Duo?' Neptune asked abruptly.

'At Christmas dinner in Brussels.'

'You'd never accompanied Relena to Brussels before?'

'Yes, but not to that apartment. She goes there only when Mister Yuy was there, which was a private thing for them.' Troyes glanced at Zechs again, hesitating on that. 'I did not know. She says, Mister Duo is a good man. She says, Mister Duo, he is très sérieux, yes. She says he will be good for me, I am not responsible sometimes. She wishes me to grow up.'

'Do you know what the Gundam Pilots are? What they did?'

'I know. Yes. My father is dead in the war. He was in a shelter with seventeen others when a bomb hits. The house burned.' There was more, or at least there was supposed to be, but Troyes ran out of words, his lips still parted. Neither Neptune nor Zechs prompted him, and he stared at the wall between them, the floor at his feet. The barred window at his right. 'I do not know why you think this,' he said finally. 'I do not know what I did.'

Neptune gathered her pad and stood. 'Do you need anything? Water? Coffee?'

'No.' Troyes dipped his eyes, and a small trail of wet smeared his cheek before he turned his face away to hide it. 'Water,' he said, soft, hoarse. 'Please very much.'

'We can't let him go,' Mamba said, when they had closed Troyes into his temporary prison once more.

'I know.' Zechs rubbed his chin. 'This gets more complicated every time we turn about.'

'If he's been communicating with the colonies in any way, it'll come out,' Cobra said sensibly. 'Heero Yuy's computers from Brussels were littered with clues.'

'If he is a spy, specially a second generation plant?' Neptune shook her head. 'There could be a thousand ways to leave information for people with legitimate ways of contacting the people who'd want it. Dead drops. Codes. Third and fourth party exchanges. Hell, he's walked with Relena into consuls and ambassadorial offices a hundred times, I'm sure. He could have stopped anyone in the hall and just told them outright.'
'We should look into Pieter van den Broeck,' Zechs decided, reluctant to drag one more probably innocent man into this mess, but unable to justify failing to do so. 'He could pass information without gathering much notice. Maybe it's not a coincidence he was the lawyer for Duo and Heero's trial.'

'Van den Broeck wouldn't have had any contact with Lefèvre,' Neptune guessed. 'Unless you're thinking this is bigger than just Lefèvre?' Her eyes widened. 'You don't really think-- Duo?'

'I don't think,' Zechs told her. 'But I feel like I need to. Heero acted caught in there. We can't touch him here in Sanq. Duo is another story, and it looks an awful lot like Duo's the nexus of a network of people well placed to quietly supply an intelligence operation.'

'What intelligence?' Neptune's spread hands were as expressive as Lefèvre's fists. 'Look, Lefèvre I get. He'd see plenty just looking over the Princess' shoulder. But Duo's going to see what, exactly? Two teenagers making out in the second bedroom? That's the sole observation of any value, and it seems to me it was more of an open secret than not. He works in a garage, he was living alone til this all started, and even you--'

'Maybe meeting me was an accident,' Zechs said flatly. 'Or maybe it was an opportunity to get inside Preventers. Yuy's busy playing the Relena angle, so Duo takes advantage of Tropic's crusade and gets an in,'

'If they wanted an in on Preventers they would have accepted employment the first dozen times it was offered,' Neptune dismissed him, exasperated, as if she hadn't just spent two hours attempting to pin Troyes Lefèvre on the smallest slips for far less reason. Zechs shook his head, ready to snap back, but their fellow agents put a determined end to the incipient argument.

'We're swinging wide,' Mamba interrupted firmly. 'We can't fly in every direction at once. Wind, what do you need us to do first?'

It was Zechs who blushed, now, at being forcibly reminded it was his role to command. He took a calming breath, and began at the beginning. 'Did we get any word at all on Quatre Winner's condition?'

'Touch and go,' Mamba shrugged. 'Still in surgery.'

'If he dies,' Cobra warned, 'there will be hell to pay. We just put all the Pilots on television in a show of unity with Sanq. Even if there's proof he was ill beforehand, it will look very bad for him to die here.'

'We need to get in contact with his family.' Zechs chose her for that, since Cobra had the most tact in such situations. 'But be clear we're the intermediary with the hospital, and don't give out the location. If he does die-- well, it had better be us who set the timeline for dealing with it, for good or ill. And if it goes the other way, I want Barton back here the moment Winner's stable. We need to be the ones in control.' Another deep breath. 'And on the subject of control, let's deal with the Princess sooner than later. She'll have questions and she'll be more tempted to start issuing orders and ultimatums if we stonewall. Neptune, shadow Chang. I don't have the best read on him, but I don't sense any immediate danger out of that corner. We'll assume he's reasonable and won't add to the problems here, for self-preservation if nothing else. It doesn't benefit him to be separated from his companions, so threats to keep everyone incomunicado in their rooms should be enough to quell protest there. Mamba, you're on Tropic clean-up. Get the video and transcript and start looking for patterns. Let's make sure we didn't miss anything.'

His people nodded their assent and their agreement. He was pleased to see there was nothing to
add, and that they all wore their determination easily, without agitation. They'd come through a hard thing in good condition, and they were ready to deal with the next.

To say Relena was displeased was to say the ocean was wet. Relena was in a towering rage, but she was wise enough to contain it in the absence of sufficient privacy to properly express it. She stood before an unlit fireplace of white marble, and looked no more lifelike than the stone, her face pale, her soft mouth flat. She had shed the jumper and the vest beneath it, and wore only her white chemise, her long hair tumbled about her shoulders, honey in the light of the window behind her. Despite knowing immediately that it was a tableau carefully constructed to strike him just as it did, Zechs halted in the door, caught for a moment in her snare.

'Mother used to sit at that vanity,' he said, his voice emerging rusty. 'In her slip. Her hair like that. She'd let me watch as she put on her make up.'

Guilt flickered in Relena's eyes. 'What did she use?'

'Not much. She did her eyes. And a touch of colour on her lips. Perfume. She would always-- she would let me squeeze the pump.'

Relena turned away. Her hair fell against her cheek. She took up a crocheted shawl from the bed, and wrapped herself in it. Only then did Zechs pay any mind to the rest of the room, and realised Heero Yuy was there. Sitting on the bed, his back to the headboard. Clothed, Zechs noted immediately, suspicious, and scowled. Clothed, but not enough for Zechs' comfort. His jacket, neckcloth, stockings lay discarded on a nearby ottoman. His shirt was unbuttoned.

'Troyes,' Relena asked then.

'We're not prepared to release him yet.'

'Are you prepared to charge him?'

'No,' Zechs replied, matching her cool tone. 'We have forty-eight hours to determine whether charges are appropriate.'

'And then he'll be released.'

'If we can't establish anything that warrants charges,' he said, irritated she was making him join all the dots so obviously.

'You won't,' Relena retorted, her stony facade breaking at last. 'Even if he is a spy.'

That surprised him. 'Do you suspect him?'

'No. I didn't. But even if it is true, does it matter? He's been at my side for years. And I have to choose to believe that will matter as much as any mission he may or may not have been given by people who are far away from what we do here.'

'That choice may be deadly, Relena.'

'It's the only choice I've ever had. There is no political cover for a princess with no heirs in a conquered kingdom. Everyone who's ever come to my side is suspect, Zechs. That includes Preventers.'

'If anything, Relena, Preventers are overly invested in Sanq--'
'Led very graciously by the woman who assassinated my adoptive father and buried the hatchet on the field of battle in what might be courteously called expedient circumstances.'

They were getting afield. Zechs put out a hand, and they stood in silence for a moment. It was Heero who broke it, rising from the bed and crossing between them. Zechs refused to turn his head to follow, aware of Heero's movements on the periphery of his vision. Only when Heero interposed himself again did Zechs deign to look, and then only because Heero came to a halt directly before him, hand outstretched.

'What is this?' Zechs asked him, taking the paper Heero extended.

'The name of my colonial contact,' Heero said.

Zechs took the note. It was indeed a name, though not one he knew. He did, however, recognise the address. 'I've been there,' he recalled, straining to think when. He looked up. 'This is the postal office you used in Brussels.'

'Yes.'

'You told me you had a system with Duo. Mailing every day.'

'Yes. That's true.'

'But you chose that postal office in particular. You had a man there, I don't remember his name--'

'Gervaas. He wasn't my contact. He was just a nice old man. He liked Duo, not me. But he was nice to me because of Duo.' Heero lifted one shoulder in a shrug. 'That happened a lot. Anastasie is the morning shift manager. She recognised Duo, the first time we went in. She approached me for confirmation. And she agreed to carry messages for me. Duo didn't know. He just thought I was attached to that office, because I get stuck on things.' He huffed a small breath. 'Being a cripple can be useful sometimes.'

'Heero,' Relena said.

'It was me,' Heero said, ignoring her, maybe not even hearing her. His eyes bored into Zechs'. 'I initiated contact with the colonies. I used Duo's computers to try and break through the firewalls to colonial networks. And I used Troyes to get to Duo when Árni Olsen took him.'

'Is Troyes a colonial plant?'

'I don't know,' Heero said. 'But it doesn't matter. Troyes is a rich kid with no real idea what laws and murder and danger really are. Even if he is a colonial asset, he's just a kid. He'll never be a danger to anyone. It takes someone like me to turn an asset into an action. And I'm already out of your hold. The only one you've got left is Duo. Leave him in prison or make him a Preventer, it doesn't matter. So as far as I can tell, Tropic won. He neutralised us. And you let him, because you agreed with him. The Gundam Pilots were a danger to Relena Peacecraft and everything she stands for. And now we're not. That's why Tropic came in with no protest. That's why he wasted an opportunity to come in with guns blazing and reinforcements and an entire conspiracy of resistance at his back. He didn't need to. You did his dirty work for him.'

It was the most Heero Yuy had ever said to him. It was the last time they'd ever speak that forthrightly.

'We'd like to be alone,' Heero said then. Relena looked up, and then away. Zechs swallowed.
'I'll keep you informed,' Zechs managed, and stuffed Heero's note in his pocket. He hesitated at the door, his hand on the latch. But he didn't turn back. He left, and quietly shut the door behind him.

Cobra found him in the room they'd been using as their informal Command, staring moodily into a laptop's humming screen without reading a word. She said, 'Word from the hospital. Winner's out of surgery. Stable condition. Oxygen deprivation at the mines, the trip to Earth. Nearly killed himself for a bit of political theatre.'

Zechs rubbed strained eyes. 'One day we'll all get past the instinct to kill or die trying over every tiny provocation.'

She raised her eyebrows at that. 'Tiny provocation?'

He nearly let it pass. Then decided not to. 'Was this worth it?' he asked her bluntly.

She pulled a chair beside his. 'I'm not sure I know what you mean.'

He wasn't sure, either. Or rather he was, he saw with great clarity now. Or hindsight. But he quietly freed her from having to bear his burdens, merely shaking his head. 'Never mind,' he said softly. 'Tired.'

'Evidently the family didn't know Winner had jumped ship to Earth,' Cobra said then, apparently taking him at his word. 'One of the sisters is coming down. The one married to the lawyer.'

Likely they were worried Preventers wouldn't protect Winner and Barton from the same indictment that had stranded Heero and Duo on the planet. Likely it was a smart thing, to get a lawyer to them early. Zechs put that problem aside for the moment. It was a different climate than the frightened, reactionary years just after the war, and he rather thought any reaction to the sudden expansion of population of planet-side Pilots would hold til cooler thoughts prevailed. Especially after Relena's televised diplomacy.

'It might be smart to suggest in their hearing that someone get Chang and Barton on a flight home,' he decided. 'If Winner can't be moved yet, we can at least get the other two out of sight.'

'Let Spider be the one to say it,' Cobra said. 'He can always swear in court it was just the usual tactlessness.'

Zechs gave her a perfunctory smile for that. 'Doubtless.'

Mamba joined them then, knocking briskly at the door to announce himself and dropping into a chair with a sigh. 'Nothing on the Lefèvre boy that we didn't already know. Everything in his file checks out.'

'Release him?' Cobra wondered.

'No choice,' Zechs said. The screen he'd been staring at was the order, and needed only a click of a button to put it through. Both his agents noted that, and Zechs shook his head at their concern. 'We'll watch. But all we can do is watch.'

Mamba pursed his lips. 'Is it over, then?'

'Feels over,' Cobra said tentatively.

Not by a long stretch. But Zechs nodded his agreement. 'Over,' he said.
'Not quite.' That was Neptune, who'd come in so quietly Zechs hadn't noticed. She took up a stance against the wall, arms crossed over her chest. 'Duo,' she said.

'Not tonight.' Zechs closed the laptop. 'There's still cleanup here and I want proof positive Tropic didn't leave any surprises laying about. I've asked the local branch to take over duties for the next eight hours. I want everyone rested and fresh for tomorrow. We need objective eyes. We'll reconvene at oh-seven-hundred. Agreed?'

'Zechs--'

'We're all emotional right now,' he said. He met her eyes squarely. 'We need to feel what we have to feel, and then let it go. Sleep. That's an order.'

He thought they'd fight him on it. But, one by one, they nodded. Even Neptune didn't put up a fight; if anything, she seemed oddly defeated. She was the first to leave. Cobra touched him on the shoulder before she went, comfort and companionship in one. Mamba smiled at him.

But he disobeyed himself. Much as his body wanted a soft bed, he couldn't sleep. He shuffled papers, he read the case file again, he even checked in on the FreeSpace operation on L4. He watched the security feed of Tropic's long walk in, watched the feed of his van headed out. He dozed, a few minutes here and there, but always woke feeling itchy and restless. At last he wandered the deserted halls, and stopped in the orangery, the small glass-walled verandah stuffed with heady scents of blooming greenery. He stretched out on a chaise, and closed his eyes to wait for the dawn.
They brought Duo in with bruises and a fresh cast. The old one had covered his forearm. The new one stretched above the elbow.

Zechs dug his fingernails into his thighs to control his reaction. Flying into a rage served no-one. Duo was allowed to sit, though the guard cuffed him to the steel bar on the table. Zechs pushed the water bottle across the table, then took it back and unscrewed the cap first. Duo sipped, awkward with the cast restraining his grip. He said, 'Hi.'

'Hi.' Zechs flicked a glance at the guard, and then they were alone. Alone as they could be in a room monitored by the prison administration. 'Did you file a complaint about your treatment?' Zechs asked.

Duo drank again, three large swallows. He lowered the bottle to the table. 'There's no point.'

'They took the initiative to move you to Solitary?'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'Did they also take the initiative to punish--'

'Zechs.' Duo brushed his hair behind his ear. 'The Princess okay?'

'Yes.' Zechs curled his fingers over his knees. 'Yes. Our operation was successful. Tropic is in custody.'

'I'm glad.'

'Duo.'

'If you were going to have me released, we'd be having this conversation outdoors.' Duo met his eyes. 'I didn't have my hopes up,' he said then. 'You're not disappointing me. It's okay, Zechs.'

'It's not.' God, the monitors. But Duo was owed the truth. 'It's my decision. It's my fault you're still here.'

'I know. I can read an org chart. I know what kind of decisions the deputy makes.'

'There are questions that have to be resolved. We will come through. I will.'

'Yeah.' Duo smiled. A small smile. It stretched the split in his lip. 'They let me have a newspaper the other day. They came to Earth.'

He'd assumed Duo would be in informational blackout, in Solitary. It was good to know someone had done him a kindness. It reassured him the rough treatment had happened before, likely another prisoner. That didn't make it better, but at least it had been limited exposure. 'They were brave,' he murmured. 'Or foolish. Par for the course with you Gundam Pilots. Winner... Quatre's in hospital. It was touch-and-go for a bit. He'll need long-term treatment.'

The spark of concern in Duo's face was only mildly alleviated by his reassurances. 'Related to what happened on L4 or something Tropic did?'
'L4. Not that it... Yes, because of the bombing, and the oxygen deprivation he suffered, but if he hadn't flown to Earth on a gamble to save you and Heero, he might have been fine, or at least under a doctor's care where the symptoms would be noticed. He's damn lucky, in truth. Duo.' He flattened his hands to the table. 'Duo, I need promises. I need promises from you or my options are extremely limited. It can't be like this anymore. You're all too used to throwing everything you have at a target. That has to stop. We are not at war. You can't keep running around Preventers, you can't keep secrets from Preventers, you can't-- There are rules. The only way you walk out of here is by agreeing to abide by those rules. And I have to believe you. I can't pretend to believe you knowing you'll throw me off the second something happens to trigger fight-or-flight. I know it's going to be hard and I know it's unfair. Your friends will walk away without any of what I'm asking for you. But that's how it's going to be. If you can't do that, there's nothing I can do to help you, do you understand me?'

Even in their most intimate moments they had never been this close to absolute honesty. Duo looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. And maybe he was. Stripped of bias, of pre-judgement, of that history Duo had claimed they shared. Zechs ached, a little, to tear that down. He'd liked that edifice more than he'd known, til he'd realised how much it stood between them. 'So tell me now,' Zechs said. 'Troyes Lefèvre. Is he a colonial spy?'

Duo's mouth quirked. His eyes drifted rightward, to the camera and its red-dot light blinking at them from the ceiling. 'If he was, I wouldn't know. I don't have contact with the colonies, it's part of my parole.'

'You were never provided with lists, during your time in the Resistance? Plants, contacts, leads?'

'Always as-needed. You know that. They never would have exposed the entire network to someone as vulnerable as the Pilots. And, before you ask, no. I don't know who sat at the top. The money was Dekim Barton, but the orders came through relays five or six deep.'

'When you were bargaining to get yourself arrested in Heero's place, you know you would have been deported to L2. Did you have a reasonable expectation that if you were deported you would be absorbed by colonial intelligence, or any other colonial party who would see you as an asset?'

'A reasonable expectation,' Duo repeated slowly. 'I don't know. It strikes me as reasonable that someone would think I have value. I'm a name. But I'm not connected. I haven't piloted anything since I was sixteen and I don't have contact with anyone who'd want me to pilot anything. Except Preventers.'

'When you come over to Preventers it's going to be public. We'll do everything but take out front-page notices in the papers. Will that make you a target for colonial interests?'

'I don't know. It didn't for Wufei, or not much. But Preventers was a different beast, back then.'

'When Preventers bring you in we'll handle your parole and any outstanding legal restrictions. But if you have contact with the colonies other than what's required for your position with us you'll be in violation of more than just your parole conditions. You will be arrested. There will be no trial. No access to Pieter van den Broeck. No last-minute help from Heero charging in to save you. And no offers of asylum. If this sounds at all like an avenue of escape, I assure you otherwise. We won't deport you. You will disappear into solitary confinement in a Preventers-operated facility, not a national prison where you would be subject to--'

'I get it.'
'Don't interrupt me. I want to be perfectly clear with you because I need you to understand there will be no way to save you if you mess this up. You are twenty. You could spend eighty years in solitary confinement. You would never get out, Duo.'

Duo's face was hard to look at. Tight around the eyes, the lips compressing flat and bloodless and then smoothing into something like despair. Duo nodded.

Zechs opened the file folder he'd brought, flipping it toward Duo. 'This is our employment offer. Read it closely. But sign it now.'

'Why are you doing this?'

'You knew I would do it.'

'But why are you doing it like this?'

'Because the seriousness of this situation has been made more than clear for me.' He reached across the table, as near to Duo's hand cuffed to the bar as he dared with those cameras on them. 'Because I care about you. And this is the only way to ensure you're safe.'

'Is that a good enough reason?' Duo asked, almost too softly to be heard.

'It's the only possible reason.' He took the pen from his pocket, uncapped it, and set it before Duo. 'Sign.'

Duo rolled it just a few degrees. To the left, then the right. He took it up slowly. He breathed, a sharp cut-off gasp, as if he were holding himself together so tightly he'd forgot how to let go. He dragged the file an inch nearer, set the point of the pen's nib to the first signature block. He didn't sign. He said, 'This says placement in-- this says placement in Sanq.'

'Yes.'

'Not Brussels.'

'No.'

'Wh-- how? Why.'

'Sanq has been understaffed. This latest adventure makes it clear we need more agents in situ. And, with the Gundam Pilots pulling stunts in the kingdom, it's obviously going to remain a hot spot.' Zechs wet his lips. 'It's the only place we can put you, readily. Politically. The Princess has already made a stink of having the Pilots on her soil. This feeds the ongoing story without drawing you undue attention. And, frankly, no-one in Europe would have you.'

'I just.' Duo's voice failed. He didn't say the rest of it. There was something in his eyes, some question begging for an answer. Zechs said nothing. He flicked his eyes to the camera. Duo dropped his gaze, swallowed hard.

He signed. Flipped through the pages, signing at each marked line. And then he flung down the pen and slumped back in his chair, staring at Zechs with dark mourning eyes.

'Thank you,' Zechs rasped. He stood, gathering the file together. 'The release order should come through within twenty-four hours. You'll have an escort. You will be given an opportunity to pack your things. Anything you can't immediately carry with you will be shipped at a later date. You'll be driven to the airport and flown to New Victoria for a two-week orientation, which will include a
renewal of your pilot's license. In your case, an actual issuing of a license under a legal name. You'll be issued a weapon license and a passport and you will be delivered to the Sanq Branch for intensive training. You'll be partnered with someone. You will treat the entire process with respect. You will keep your head down and obey orders.'

'Understood,' Duo said. 'Sir.'

He was too steeled to the pain to let it tear at him. He'd done too many hard things in his life before. One more sacrifice was nothing. Not if it worked.

'Zechs,' Duo asked, as he opened the door. When he glanced back, Duo said, 'Do you trust me?'

'I want to,' Zechs answered.

'That's not enough, is it.'

'No. Not really.' He almost turned, and stopped himself. He asked, 'Do you believe I'm doing the right thing?'

Duo's shoulders lifted and fell. 'I believe you believe you are.'

'That's not enough.'

'No,' Duo said, almost inaudibly. 'But... it's something.'

Neptune met him in the corridor. She slid her hand along his arm, a brief soothing touch that forgave as much as she could. 'Come on, Chief. Let's get the paperwork put in.'

He followed her out, and studiously concentrated on placing one foot before the other.

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Sally finished his report and set it down with a sigh. 'All right,' she said.

Zechs raised his eyebrows. 'All right? That's it?'

'No. Yes. I don't know, Zechs. I don't know what the hell to say about it all.' She propped her chin on her fist. 'No, I do know. The last five years, everything we've done has been place-holding. We were just sitting with our thumbs up our butts place-holding until the new world order arrived. And here it is. Gundam Pilots on Earth making policy with Relena Peacecraft. A bunch of teenagers are going to rewrite history. Again.'

Zechs smiled at that. 'They're not technically teenagers anymore.'

'Quatre Winner is nineteen.' She blew out a deep breath and sat back in her chair. 'When can Winner take a space flight?'

'He's stable. I wouldn't want to be the one to move him.'
'And Barton?'

'Chang is keeping him contained. More or less.' He played with his pen. 'Why did Chang leave Preventers? You were close to him, weren't you?'

'Close? In my expert opinion Chang Wufei has never been close to another human being in his life. There's a lot of trauma there.' She shrugged sadly. 'He was a good kid, but the kid was the significant part of it. I don't know if he would have evened out eventually, but Preventers weren't good for or to him.' She caught his look, and sighed. 'There's nothing saying it will be the same for Duo. We're better organised now. We don't have firefights every Tuesday with whatever crop of malcontents find a cache of mobile suits this week.'

'Sally...'' He looked up. 'I think I'm having an idea.'

'I'll take anything you've got. There's going to be an Inspector General investigation, you know. I'm going to have to suggest it.'

'There's likely to be quite a bit more than that.' He tapped his pen on the edge of her desk. 'This isn't fully formed-- just hear me out. You know that organisation Duo's involved with? He reported it in his background investigation.'

'Small Something?'

'Small Arms. Did you read the--'

Sally held up a hand. 'I glanced through it. I'm busy, Zechs. And I'm exhausted. Just assume you need to fill me in.'

'They perform a certain kind of service for former child soldiers. There's a name for it, I'm not going to get it right, but it's something like demobilising, educating, rehabilitation. It's all aimed at recovering kids who haven't got the skills to make it in a post-war society. Think about it-- if Preventers had had a programme like that, Chang Wufei might have made it with us. And we might have recruited Duo Maxwell and Heero Yuy with good purpose.'

'But we haven't got a programme like that,' Sally said.

'But maybe we should. Ever since I came back from Mars you've been complaining Preventers has lost its way, moved too far from its original function. But our original function was to protect the peace. That's not just about stopping conflict. It's about stopping the things that make conflict. Like giving a home to people who need shelter.'

'That's really not our mandate.'

'Not our only mandate, no. But maybe it should be a bigger part of it. Hell, you take that argument to its extreme, and we might have been able to stop Tropic before he started. We would have been looking for signs of maladjustment in our agents. Imagine what we could have done for Chang Wufei at sixteen if we'd been able to offer him that kind of help.' He tapped his pen at her.

'Imagine handing in a report to the IG that we're pro-actively embarking on a programme like that, to redress the wrongs Tropic's done us and move us into that new world order, voluntarily and proudly.'

'Zechs, I don't know,' Sally said reluctantly. 'It's a nice dream. It's a hell of a lot more romantic than pragmatic.'

'I know someone who's got a good blend of both characteristics. Best of all, he's a fresh recruit.
Think of what energy he'll bring to a project like that. And what friends he might bring with him. That would solve a lot of our image problems in one go. And our staffing.'

Sally stared at him. Suddenly she laughed, and scrubbed her face with both hands. 'Tell you what, Deputy Director. You get Relena and a few other world leaders of her choice to sign an action plan, and I'll shill for it at the Hague myself.'

'Be careful what you wish for,' Zechs advised, grinning at her. 'I have an in with the Princess. She'll sign.'

'Damned if I do, damned if I don't.' She covered his hand when he would have risen. 'Zechs-- I don't know if it's good or not. But you make me think it's possible for us to be better, and that's why I wanted you for this. Someone has to want it badly enough.'

'I'll do my best to deliver,' he promised.

'I really, really hope so.'

**

Quatre Winner was pale and rather scruffy in his hospital pyjamas. A few days' growth of beard fuzzed his chin, and his hair was indifferently groomed. He was gazing at the blank television screen with glazed contentment, til Zechs politely cleared his throat.

'Oh,' Winner said, giving him an off-aim smile. 'Hullo, Father.'

Barton grimaced. 'Sorry,' he muttered. 'I've seen pictures. It's probably just the blond hair.'

'Morphine?' Zechs asked, drawing the surgeon's rolling stool to the gurney.

'Between that and the anaesthesia he's been--' Barton didn't finish, perhaps realising he'd come to his quota of words for the day. Zechs offered a smile, and Barton looked stiffly away.

'How are you feeling?' Zechs asked Winner directly.

Winner pointed to the bandage on his head. 'They said I'll have a scar. I said I've got plenty already, thanks. Non-negotiable.'

'I wanted to speak to both of you, actually,' Zechs said, bypassing that. 'I appreciate your cooperation in this difficult time. More than I appreciate the difficult time you've made for those of us forced to cooperate with your agenda.'

Winner tugged at Barton's sleeve. 'That was a pun,' he stage-whispered.

'No, it wasn't,' Barton said, capturing his hand and holding it.

'The fact of the matter is that getting you back to Space will be rather more difficult than your illicit trip inbound. You'll be grounded for a while. Princess Relena has made an effort to shield you
during this difficult time, but your presence in Sanq is now something of a political firestorm. You made a bold statement and it's been playing on the news for days. I'd like to discuss your options.'

'Is this a discussion?' Barton asked quietly.

'I'd like your input,' Zechs qualified. 'But there's really only two choices to make here. One: you accept a public escort back as soon as physically possible, given Quatre's condition.'

'That was always the plan.'

'I'm glad to hear there was an actual plan, since it certainly looked from the outside as if you conceived this entire adventure without an exit strategy,' Zechs replied pleasantly. Barton's mouth twitched down. 'Option two. You accept an offer of employment.'

Both Pilots looked at him with solemn meins, then. Winner was the one who answered, not quite so erratic now he had a mystery to solve. 'We're already comfortably employed,' he said.

'Yes. At some point we'll reckon with Winner Enterprises. But I think you'll find this offer is permissive enough to encompass both Preventers and your colonial interests.' Zechs provided the folder he held. 'Spend some time looking this over. As I said, you have options.'

Winner got to the paper first, though Barton tried to take it. Wide blue eyes came up to Zechs'. 'There's one of these for Wufei, isn't there?'

'Yes,' Zechs admitted. 'Although I'm hoping you'll help me convince him.'

'You might want to let me deliver it,' Winner said. 'Wufei still subscribes to duelling. He has the biggest sword.' Winner paused, and then enunciated with great care, 'Collection. Sword collection.'

Zechs hid a smile. 'I'll leave that in your capable hands. Thank you.' He rose. 'I'll be in touch. Quatre-- feel better soon. I know Duo will want to visit and he'll want to see you well.'

Barton whispered something, and Winner twined their fingers. 'We'll look forward to it,' he said for them both.

Zechs was nearly out the door when he heard Winner brightly observe, 'I should have dropped something so we could watch him pick it up. Duo has excellent taste, hasn't he.' Barton's snort didn't indicate disagreement. Zechs rubbed hot cheeks as he hurriedly pulled the door closed. Some things were better left til all parties were at full discretion.
Troyes Lefèvre was back at Relena's side. He seemed subdued, his beard growing in thicker than was fashionable, puffy skin under his eyes. He spoke with no evident difficulty to Spider, smiled politely, but when he noticed Zechs entering the room, all expression dropped away from his face, and he looked a haunted man.

For his part, Zechs ignored him. Relena had his full attention, Relena and her coterie of young men who were so hell-bent on making everything difficult. Trowa Barton was seated at one of the wrought-iron bistro tables, using one finger to push a biscuit across his plate. Chang Wufei stood barefoot between the potted lemon trees, his rigid limbs moving gracefully through archaic forms of tai chi. Heero watched with half an eye, scowling as was his usual.

Neptune met him halfway with a coffee. The mug had the seal of Sanq. Zechs eyed it with irony, but accepted it with a murmur of thanks and sipped gratefully. 'I swear I can actually feel the caffeine hit,' he sighed.

Neptune grinned. 'I love that feeling. Right there in the jaw.' She sipped from her own cup. 'Everyone's behaving, but I sense an explosion on the horizon.'

'You comfort me. Who's the likeliest culprit?'

'Yuy's the obvious one, but for the money I think it's Chang. He's the only one who hasn't got a lover to slap him down when he lets his temper out to play.'

Zechs could have lived without hearing 'lover' in that context. He powered through. 'Is there a--person? Who could be called in, right now? If we could get him-- her--'

'Dude is straight,' Neptune informed him confidently. 'Judging by the amount of time he's spent staring down my blouse.' She smiled slyly. 'Nice to know it's not lost on everyone around here,' she said archly.

'Spider doesn't count?'

Neptune made a face at him. 'Don't be gross.'

He grinned at her over the rim of his mug. 'If we could get her here within five hours, I'd say that's money well spent.'

'No lover. Not even a long-distance girlfriend. I'd peg him as the type for an internet relationship, personally, but spending a year at a monastery would kill pretty much any connection.'

'Any other ideas on keeping him calm?'

'Absolutely. Roofie him.'

He choked on that. 'Pardon?'

'The coffee would be a good start. Or tea, in his case. It comes up from the kitchen brewed.'

'Please tell me you didn't.'

She made him wait for it. He was just starting to worry she wasn't actually joking when she grinned at him. 'Damn, you fell for it.'
'You are terrifying,' he said, bending to give her an entirely unprofessional peck on the cheek. 'Don't make that joke in front of Duo, though. Remember that actually happened to him.'

'Who do you think came up with it?'

Zechs turned. Duo stood there, though no further in than the doorway. He hung back even when Neptune grinned and waved, and Zechs thought he understood. He went to Duo, bending to provide another kiss, this one far more intimate. Or at least he intended to. Duo turned his cheek to Zechs' lips. Zechs held in his grimace. He understood. He allowed himself to impart a caress, weaving his fingers into Duo's silky hair for a moment. Then he let go, and took a step back, using his body to shield Duo from anyone who might glance casually in their direction.

'How are you feeling?' he asked quietly.

'Jet-lagged. Is that coffee?'

Zechs surrendered his mug immediately. 'If you're not ready--' 

'I just need to work up to it.' Duo shrugged one shoulder, something Zechs took as an expression of nerves or irritation before he realised it was just meant to shift the strap of his sling. Zechs took care of it for him. 'Thanks,' Duo said, blushing slightly. 'I'm, uh. Discombobulated, I guess. Left half my brain in New Victoria.'

He wanted to say something kind, or at least funny. He nearly complimented Duo on wearing the uniform well, but couldn't. Duo wasn't wearing it voluntarily.

'They've missed you,' he settled on offering. 'Heero, obviously. I think we more or less managed to contain him, or Chang did. Did you know that they've been sparring? I'd call it practise, but it's a little too violent. A lot too violent. I think they agree on a safeword before each session.'

That earned him a little twitch that was maybe, possibly, nearly a smile. 'Sounds hot.'

Now it was Zechs who blushed. 'Yes,' he said. At that, Duo finally grinned. Zechs would throw himself on that altar any time for the crinkle of Duo's eyes, the tilt of his head. It was worth it.

'All right,' Duo said then. 'Let's get this over with. The sooner they get it out of their systems, the sooner we can get to the yelling and the awkward standing around.'

That turned out to be an accurate prediction. When Duo walked in, the reaction was gratifyingly enthusiastic. To Duo's intense embarrassment, he was roundly applauded. His face was red as cooked lobster as Relena gave him a hug so hard and long he had to beg her to breathe. She was immediately replaced by Heero, and a sort of respectful silence fell, then, as everyone turned instinctively away to give them as much privacy as could be had in a crowd. Zechs watched from the corner of his eye, though, and noticed Relena did as well; their young men weren't just theirs, but this kind of sharing could be permitted. Heero put his arms around Duo, at first acting as though Duo might snap in two from the merest pressure. Duo put an end to that, looping his good arm about Heero's neck and dragging him close. They stood locked in that embrace, their foreheads touching, murmuring to each other too softly to be overheard.

Then it was Chang, who bowed low and clapped Duo on the shoulder. Barton shook Duo's hand and accepted Duo's rough affectionate mussing of his hair. Out of habit, Zechs did observe closely as Troyes Lefèvre greeted Duo. Zechs judged him genuinely pleased with Duo's release, and he was the only one who asked after the arm, which indicated, probably, little more than that the Pilots had a shared expectation that any confinement equalled abuse. Duo ducked the questions
with deft grace. From Neptune, who waited til last but came forward with a big grin, he got a wicked kiss. Neptune was possibly right about Chang's interest in her. He looked just slightly piqued at the way Duo and Neptune fell into a natural rhythm of teasing and flirting.

'Where's Quat?' Duo asked then.

'Still in hospital.'

'I'm sorry,' Duo said. He cupped Barton by the neck. 'He's getting better, though, right?'

'He's getting better,' Barton echoed in his quiet voice. 'He wanted to be here to meet you.'

'We'll try to work it out,' Duo said, which was not quite a promise, not obliging Zechs to correct him. 'Give him my love. Tell him I sent him the secret handshake.'

'Why does Quatre get a secret handshake, and not the rest of us?' Chang asked, playing offended, though his twinkling eyes gave him away.

'There is no secret handshake. Quat just thinks if it happens on L2 it's gang-related.' Duo looked around. 'Walls're still standing. Not bad, for our team.'

'Everyone performed with admirable restraint,' Zechs said. 'Once they got here, that is.'

'Aww, don't be sore.' Duo put on a flippant grin, but Zechs found it oddly hollow, as if there weren't enough or the right kind of emotion behind it. 'Though it does raise the question. At what point do we decide it's probably not our job to save the world anymore?'

That was deceptively barbed. Chang registered it with a mouth going pinched; Barton looked away. Heero said, 'Not the world. You.'

'Bullshit.' Duo shuffled one foot over the tile, staring off into corners rather than catch any eyes. 'Saving me would have been a jailbreak or some stupid shit like that. Thanks for not doing that. Thanks for not setting off a bomb in Brussels or some stupid shit like that, guys, that's the only way I can tell you all still have working heads on your shoulders. It was stupid as fuck coming here.'

'Duo,' Chang began.

'What if they arrested you?' Duo overrode him. 'Did any of you think about that? You could have been tried, you-- you fucking assholes. You think of that? I did. Sitting in a jail cell and so thankful it was me, just me, because you believe you're somehow responsible for saving everything--'

'We're capable,' Heero interjected flatly. 'And we did.'

'Since when? I mean since when is it our job? I didn't leave L2 to save the fucking Earth, I left to blow the shit out of the Alliance. What happened here was some stupid shit with a rogue Preventer and you turned it into an international incident.'

'Which I allowed,' Relena said. Though she'd spoken quietly, such was the quality of her voice that everyone turned to look. Duo cut himself off mid-breath. 'Which I facilitated,' Relena admitted candidly, and she inclined her head to Duo. 'It's not the way I would have chosen to deal with Agent Tropic and his threats, but I think it was the best we could do in the circumstances. But you're right. Those are circumstances we largely created for ourselves. For what that's done to you, for what that's forced on you, Duo, I'm so sorry.'
Maybe all along Duo had needed to hear that. Relena had done what Zechs hadn't, couldn't, with bluster and ultimatums. Her sincere apology seemed to rock him to the core, and Zechs was sure Duo's eyes were wet for a moment before he blinked it stoically away. But it silenced him. He ducked his head in awkward acknowledgment.

'I have to go,' Duo mumbled then. 'Checkin at my new station. My escort's outside. They only gave me a few minutes.'

Duo's moment may have passed, but that explosion Neptune had reckoned on was in the offing. Zechs hadn't seen it starting, but Heero was on the move, stalking forward. 'I want to--' he began, jaw stubbornly out-thrust, and inwardly Zechs groaned, damning Heero for being too stunted to catch the clues flying all around him. Duo would have to tell him no, and that would set off the very argument Relena had just solved. Chang had seen it, too, and made a swipe for Heero, and Spider after him went the extraordinary length of stepping physically into his path, but Heero neatly sidestepped them both and went barrelling toward Duo.

Troyes Lefèvre stepped into the breach. He was moving almost as fast as Yuy. 'I will accompany you,' he said, with a little bow toward the Preventers. 'As official envoy for the Princess, who is still confined to the grounds for her safety. Relena has drafted a letter of thanks to the Sanq station Preventers, for their quick and competent action at Malmö.'

'Thank you, Troyes,' Relena said warmly, smiling up at him. 'Perfect timing. And, please, my personal thanks to Agent Ulv, for her promise to review the Hotline procedures. I think we all have an interest in ensuring no call for help goes ignored or unanswered.'

That set Zechs in his place. Granted he hadn't yet been official Deputy of Preventers when Troyes had relayed Duo's whereabouts during the kidnapping Tropic had orchestrated, but all of Preventers had geared toward a failure, there. Who knew but that Árni Olsen would be alive, still, if Preventers had been faster to respond, or spread less thinly on the ground in Sanq to catch Olsen before he murdered his grandfather Pargan. For that matter, Zechs might never have been Deputy at all, without the necessity of addressing those failures. Relena was right to call him to the carpet, and even to do it publicly. He didn't like it any better for that, but he acknowledged it with a bow of his own. Relena's smile went small and personal. Yes, they had both grown, during this mess. As had they all. Even Heero, who was, just perhaps, not so stunted after all. He stood at Duo's side, every muscle straining protectively, every atom in him concentrated down to the fist he'd locked about Duo's good wrist. Duo was whispering to him, and leant in so their shoulders touched. Zechs looked away.

So. Yuy wouldn't threaten the terms of their parole by clinging to Duo's side against all odds and good sense, which left Zechs with no greater worry than a possible colonial spy who'd just managed to manoeuvre himself into a car with a Gundam Pilot headed for a Preventers facility in a volatile nation. It was enough to make his head ache. Zechs rubbed at his weary eyes, and did the only thing he could-- let it go. They were in this mess because he'd given Tropic the benefit of every doubt, but he didn't see how he could do otherwise with Troyes Lefèvre. He had to trust somewhere, and he chose to trust Duo. Duo was a Preventer, now, and he'd do the right thing. Zechs believed that.

So he stepped back to the door, opening it wide, and corralled everyone with a polite cough. 'Let's get you to checkin,' he said, and Duo stepped away from Heero with a parting squeeze. Heero let go with obvious reluctance, and Zechs could see the white marks of pressure his grip had left on Duo's hand. Duo came, Troyes following, and Neptune pulled up the rear.

'Sir;' Duo said briefly, passing him by, and Zechs pretended it didn't cut to hear it.
'He's scrawny,' Ulv said critically.

Duo scowled. Neptune grinned, which made Duo scowl harder. Ulv glared him down, quite formidably. That she towered as tall as Zechs and looked far more ready to do violence may have contributed to how quickly Duo recovered his manners.

'There's some additional paperwork,' Zechs said gently. 'I'd like to get Agent Maxwell--'

'Rosenkål.'

Duo glanced frowningly at his new commander, and then uncertainly at Zechs. Zechs kept a straight face, only just. Ulv had called her agent 'Brussels Sprout'-- a clever little nickname that was sure to spread, judging by the snicker they overheard from someone nearby. It inevitably marked Duo as both a continental import and a youthful newbie, but Zechs supposed it lacked the meanspirited intent that something recalling his days as a Rebel would have had. Everyone endured a little hazing when they came in fresh, and it would ultimately mean they accepted Duo as one of their own. Duo would see that, eventually. Probably.

'Let's get your agent to his workstation so he can settle in,' Zechs finished, and Ulv gave him a grunt for compliance and led the way.

Sanq's contingent of Preventers was larger than an otherwise small kingdom would require, though they had just got finished proving how necessary it was. Relena's letter was received with great enthusiasm, read aloud and immediately posted to the main message board alongside other treasures. Preventers weren't meant to be bound to any one nation, but Zechs couldn't complain about a little partisanship after it had just served so well. They had two floors of an office building in downtown Kalmar, and everything smelled a bit like fried fish and strong coffee. The open floorplan created more of a collaborative workspace than in Brussels, where carpeted cubicle walls encouraged solitary tasks in respectful quiet. Agents slouched on the corners of desks with mugs in hand, chatting over shared desktop computers, and the windows were all open wide to the breeze. It would be a change from Duo's garage, but not so drastic as a more oppressive office environment would have felt. Duo was met with assessing stares, but also with smiles, a few handshakes, and more than a few whispers of recognition. Sanq had far more truck with Gundam Pilots than many European countries, having been defended by two of them during the war, and it was clear that these agents knew Duo Maxwell, even if he hadn't been part of the recent broadcasts intended for Tropic.

'Your partner, at least for now,' Ulv announced gruffly, halting them at a pair of desks shoved together near the back corner. It lacked a little sunlight and it would require Duo to constantly cross in front of all his fellows for everything from the loo and the exit to the supply closet and the water cooler, but it was, in its way, a sensitive choice as well. Duo would have his back to the wall, be protected from three approaches. For a young man fresh from a rough stay in prison, it would soothe the nerves. Duo relaxed just incrementally when he saw it. He perked enough for a reasonable welcome, pressing palms with an older woman with short brown hair and strongly
Nordic features. 'What happened to the arm?' Agent Ingefaer asked him as they shook.

'Gator wrestling,' Duo replied readily, and for one startled moment she stared at him. Then a tiny hint of a smile crossed her face. It gladdened Zechs. Duo would need a friend here.

'More paperwork?' Duo wondered, as he logged in for the first time at his computer. He tapped the keys one-handed, given his sling. He was nearly as rapid with five fingers as Zechs was with ten. His expression fell a little gloomy as he logged in to the classified network. He opened his email, and clicked obediently on the Inbox. 'Did someone spam me already?' he asked, leaning forward to scroll through the dozens of messages awaiting him. His allotted memory was nearly full.

'You've got five active cases,' Ulv told him. 'And that's going light during your probation. We run ten to fifteen on a full load.' She dropped a paper case file on the edge of his desk. 'And that's your little side project. No more than forty-five percent of your time, and I'll expect weekly reports on your progress.'

Duo flipped it opened. His head came up sharply. 'This is--'

'Yes.' Zechs dragged an unoccupied chair near, leaning forward to balance his elbows on his knees. 'We have signed consent from all of the others. Which makes it, actually, the first official act, post-war, by all the Gundam Pilots. Once you sign.'

He'd been saving this moment. He had a lot to make up for, not least how he'd attacked Duo at the prison, yelling and bullying and deliberately taking the harshest path. Duo wasn't the only man with a temper in their relationship. He'd been angry and he'd been scared, and he'd taken it out on the person least able to fight back. It didn't give back much of what Duo was losing, but it was something, he hoped.

'United Earth Sphere Conflict-Zone Transitory Health Centre,' Duo read aloud. He traced the edge of the yellow memorandum. "Designed for a three-month stay. Often the child's first contact with normative social services following extraction. The three-month programme includes medical attention, trauma rehabilitation, life-skills and economic workshops, and a vocational start-up kit for use in three elective pathways. Where possible, children will be returned to families or caretakers in non-conflict zones. When family is unlocatable or conflict prevents return, children will be housed through UES Volunteers. Children over the age of thirteen will be provided with career and educational placement if so desired." He swallowed. 'Pretty comprehensive,' he said.

'It's only a draft,' Zechs replied. 'Pieter wrote it. He thinks you'll have a lot to add.'

"Preventers will provide safety and protective services, location and background checks, and Demobilization Development opportunities in cooperation with the International Rescue Committee. Former child soldiers will learn the skills to participate in DDR for the newly extracted, providing a network of support and understanding. Budget has been set aside for seven interns, two full-time staff, and one regional manager on part-time assignment."

'The regional manager is you,' Zechs pointed out helpfully.

Duo coughed into his elbow, struggling to keep a blank face. 'Where're the Gundam Pilots coming in?'

'Page two. Three.' Zechs reached, but Duo beat him to it, turning back the pages of the draft plan. 'Mostly in the career and educational placement,' he said, finding the paragraphs. 'Colonial resources will be fairly crucial. Places for the older children to go. It so happens there's a population slump in the colonies, thanks to restricted travel and services during the Alliance years.
An influx of willing--'

'Child labour,' Duo muttered, but he was only half serious, picking at a thumbnail with his teeth.

'Immigrants,' Zechs rephrased it. 'They'll support the universities, which have sagging numbers, and they'll help support the local economies, as well. Some will work, yes.'

'Where'd you learn about all this?'

'Reading the junk on your bedside table while you were in the bath primping your hair.'

He offered that joke quietly, low enough to travel no farther than the two of them. Ulv was talking to Troyes, a rapid exchange in the Sanqian dialect, and Duo's new partner had made herself scarce whilst the Deputy was hanging about. Duo's face fell the rest of the way, though. He closed the file.

'Thanks for this,' he said. 'It means a lot to me.'

'You're not happy about it?'

'I will be. At some point.'

'I know.'

'I just, um--' Duo sucked in a breath. 'So are we going to talk about the boundaries, here? You keep not saying anything, but I think we need to say something. Or I need to hear something, I guess.'

'Boundaries?'

'You're doing it again. I can't tell if you're just-- never mind. You're never just screwing with me.' Duo faced him directly. 'So we're done. You and me.'

Zechs didn't answer immediately. He tried to think through the words, find the right angle. Say the right thing so Duo would hear the things he really needed to. 'My feelings haven't changed. I hope you know that.'

If they were alone, he would have taken Duo's hands in his. He couldn't, not with this audience. Not without violating the code of conduct, which had been lifted wholesale from the Code of Military Justice, itself unchanged despite the loosening of sexual mores since the war-- hell, in the decades previous. Romafeller had been the final gasp of backlash against a world in which no-one especially cared who went to bed with whom, nor assumed a relationship was grounds for drumming out a commander who hadn't committed any other act of partiality and favouritism. Maybe Sally wouldn't care, either, but in accepting the position of Deputy Zechs had put himself in a position of greater scrutiny. If Duo were only his fellow agent, he wouldn't have hesitated. But they weren't that, not now.

'Maybe in a few years,' he whispered. 'When the spotlight's off us. When the Inspector General has wrapped up the audits and all of this has died down. When you might be able to leave Preventers, if you still want to.'

'That's so shitty, Zechs.' Duo's voice was barely even as loud as his had been, a raw rasp. 'That's so fucking shitty. I love you.'

It took him a minute to get it out. Duo waited for it, staring at him with eyes overfull of emotion.
Zechs nodded, several times. 'Yes,' he managed. 'I love you too-- I love you too.'

'So you're just never supposed to date? Do you--' Duo blinked, and with a great shift of bodylanguage and expression he was suddenly all concern. 'Jesus, do you get in trouble for living with me? I mean, I guess we only lasted like a week, but is that gonna be trouble for you with the Inspection Guys--'

'Inspector General. I don't know. It's all just part of the thing with Tropic. We're not going to come out of that clean.' Zechs screwed up his mouth, and decided there was no good time to say it. 'You'll probably have to debrief with the IG. Possibly testify, if there's a hearing.'

Duo broke their gaze. He picked at a loose thread of his uniform trousers. 'Okay.'

'It's not. I'm sorry.'

'Am I at least going to...’ Duo bit his lip and released it white from pressure, like his wrist where Heero had gripped him. 'Do I at least get to see you? Talk to you? We could, um, we could talk on the phone, or... I don't know. Please.'

That almost broke his heart, spoken so honestly, so unencumbered by pride or restraint. How Duo could have lived through everything he had and still have that ability in him, he didn't know. Walking away from it felt impossible. He found himself leaning in, all unconsciously, and Duo twitched toward him, mouth falling open.

Troyes Lefèvre said, 'Excuse me, Agents. So sorry-- I wondered if it was appropriate for me to offer Agent Maxwell, er, Rosenkål, an invitation to Friday's party?'

It was excellently timed. In that Zechs wanted to commit murder for the balls of it, interrupting a moment he wanted desperately, needed. Duo jerked back, jittery, faced his computer with a cough and a flush. Troyes conveyed a certain amount of sympathy even as he cock-blocked them, incidentally saving them from revealing their relationship-- in whatever broken state it was-- in front of the entirety of the office. Zechs was fairly sure Troyes had done it for Duo, not for him.

'Very appropriate,' Zechs croaked, standing hurriedly.

'I'm really not in any kind of mood to party,' Duo said, though he took the paper envelope Troyes offered him. He sniffed it, and rolled his eyes a little. 'Gardenia?'

'Jasmine.' Troyes winked at him. 'Relena thought it was more masculine, yes.'

Duo laughed. He might have surprised himself, doing it, and guilt flickered over his face, followed by something like defiance. And then only weariness.

'I don't think they really let me out at night,' he said. 'But tell her I'm flattered.'

'Special dispensation,' Zechs countered, folding his arms over his chest. 'You're owed a celebration. It's over.'

'It's not.'

'It is, if you let it be.' Zechs allowed himself to touch the back of Duo's chair, if not Duo's shoulder, so temptingly near. 'I know there's some-- details-- still to work out--'

'Zechs.' Duo pointed to his computer screen. 'Zechs, look at that. Commander Ulv?' he raised his voice. 'There's something here you should see.'
Zechs bent to read. Two sentences in to the email, his gut dropped. By the end of it, he was on his phone and dialling.

Ulv stalked across the room and took a spot that politely shoved Zechs the hell out of her way. Duo was already printing, and his partner fetched the paper for him from the printer well. The copy went around, and more of the agents joined them when Ulv shouted out names, summoning the crowd.

'Director,' Zechs said, when Sally answered his call. 'I need the text of the original transmission of the threat to the Princess of Sanq and the Gundam Pilots.'

'What?' Sally asked him. 'Why?'

'To compare it to a new one.' Zechs snagged one of the print-outs passing around. 'Listen to this: "The Princess consorts with the enemies of peace and democracy. Until she disavows these monsters, she will be in danger."'

'Shit,' Sally said, and Zechs heard static as she talked to someone on her end.

'There's another one,' Duo said, rapidly scanning his email. 'Printing. "The Gundam Pilots are a threat to peace and the safety of the Princess of Sanq."'

'There,' Troyes said, pointing. 'From last week.'

'That's a week after we arrested Tropic,' Zechs noted. 'There's no way he could have sent this from Preventers' custody.'

'Delayed send,' Duo's partner guessed. 'He could have set it up before.'

'Different IP address,' Duo said tersely, calling up the metadata on his screen.

'You remember the IP address?' Zechs asked, startled. 'That was months ago.'

'Months ago, when it was pretty damn important,' Duo retorted. 'I'm a numbers guy.' He printed that one, too. 'They're sure fond of the word "monsters",' he said, squinting at his screen. '"Heero Yuy, Duo Maxwell, Trowa Barton, Quatre Winner, Chang Wufei, and Zechs Merquise are monsters of the worst order," he read. He glanced sidelong at Zechs. 'Welcome to the club.'

"'Their presence in the Kingdom of Sanq defiles sacred ground,'" Ulv finished. "'Every moment the Princess spends with them endangers her.'" She looked at Zechs, too. Everyone was looking at him, now. 'Well,' Ulv told Duo. 'Case number six, I think.'

'Fuck,' Duo muttered sourly.
'Nerves?' Sally asked him, sotto voce and impressively impassive in the face of their large audience. For a supposedly closed hearing, the Inspector General depositions were taking place in front of a packed hall. It was rented space-- Preventers didn't have any conference rooms big enough, so they'd decamped with their closest five hundred friends to a city-centre hotel, lavishly appointed in rich cherry wood, velvet drapes of gold and green, and rose-pattered silk wallpaper which elegant framed man-sized canvases of modern art. Zechs doubted he was the only person to grasp the irony of a stern review of Preventers' recent operations in a room that was probably costing thousands per hour, but it was steamrolling onward nonetheless.

'Nervous on Duo's behalf,' Zechs admitted, keeping his own face relaxed but unsmiling, calm. He had experienced his share of political theatre under Treize's tutelage. The Inspector General was, as Duo would have said if Zechs had been allowed anywhere near him in the last week, small potatoes compared to Romafeller's knife-sharpening monsters greedy for the slightest mis-step, or even in the days of the Specials when a secret coup had been gathering in the shadows and all eyes had rested on Treize and his glorious coterie of smartly dressed, proud young officers. The memory still held a little ache, but not as much as it once had. He was, he supposed, growing up, and moving on. Able to take those lessons for what they were, skills he needed now, and not loathe them solely for their origin.

'He'll be fine. This isn't his first time in front of interrogators, and, yes, I do know how that sounds, and what it will feel like for him. I've spent my own time in custody for mutiny against the Alliance.'

'I didn't say you hadn't.' But he couldn't help himself, and under the cover of shifting his coat from his lap to the back of the chair beside him, added, 'But you know it's different for him. What he's been through--'

'Is noted,' Sally said. 'He has more allies than you might think in this room.'

Zechs raked the head of their long table with narrowed eyes. He didn't personally know any of the staff in the IG's office; they were all people who'd come in to Preventers after he'd decamped to Mars, and til now there had been no reason for him to be concerned with the staffing there. Two were older, late fifties, at his guess, and it was true they didn't look like they were smacking their lips at the chance to rip into a fresh Gundam Pilot. A younger pair were serving themselves tea from a pot and chatting idly, and a fifth, a bland-looking young man with dark skin and a shining bald head was bent over his notepad scribbling away industriously. He was the one to watch, Zechs decided.

All too soon, the minute hand of the large grandfather clock tipped toward the hour, and chimes thundered a lengthy peal. There were a few eyes rolling by the time it finally finished, and one of the elder officers at the head table clacked the wooden ball that served as their gavel into its rest.

'Let's begin,' he said. 'Do we have video?' A tech standing by with one of two cameras nodded. 'Excellent. Good morning, Director Po, Deputy Director Merquise.'

'Good morning,' Sally replied pleasantly.

'The administrative business first. We're in day six of this hearing into recent operational irregularities in Preventers. We have present myself, Vincent Patel, Warin Carby to my far right, Sebastiaan Alpin, Deva Mitsopoulos, and to my left Gierdre Appleman. At the table we are joined
by Director Margaret Sai Li Po, and Deputy Director Zechs Merquise.' A private conference with the lead attorney had resulted in an agreement that they would preserve the fiction of Zechs' identity where possible; it was, legally, his name of long standing, and it was the name by which he'd taken his oath on accepting both employment in Preventers and the office of Deputy. 'This morning we're deposing Agent Duo Maxwell, age twenty, posting Sanq Office. Do we have the young man here yet?'

Word passed to the hall. The door opened, framing Duo, who wore his formal uniform, slightly altered to accommodate his cast and sling. Duo nodded stiffly to Zechs and Sally, and even more stiffly to the IG team, and did his best not to so much as look at the large audience all regarding him curiously. He took the seat Patel indicated, across from his commanding officers, two seats down from the lawyers, where a video camera was set to record him and a microphone would project his voice for the crowd. He sat like he expected to flee at any moment, though Zechs was sure he wouldn't. Zechs ached for him all the more.

The young black man, Carby, beat Zechs to the punch, however. He said, very mildly, 'Good morning, Agent Maxwell. Would you like a glass of water? Tea? This is a formal hearing, but I hope it won't be too uncomfortable for you.'

It was just the right note to strike. Friendly without assuming anything. Kind without embarrassing Duo. Duo relaxed just enough to clear his throat, and say, 'Um, yes. Water would be great.'

'I'd like to explain how we'll proceed,' Patel said, and though Zechs had sat through this speech several times now, including for his own deposition, it did seem geared toward buying Duo a little time, giving him some expectations that would ease his anxiety. Zechs began to hope, cautiously, that this wouldn't be so bad after all. 'We'll go over some very basic information with you, things that will seem very obvious, but that's just part of the regular way we film these things, verify facts for the record. Then we'll ask you questions about specific instances. We do have your statements from before your employment in Preventers, and it will seem like we're going over some things you've already said in a very nit-picking way, but if you'll be patient with us we'll try to get through it quickly. One of the things we're concerned with today is being very sure that you haven't been coerced in any way by Preventers.'

That was not standard procedure, of course. Zechs and Sally had known it was coming and had no way to stop the inquiry, but at its base they were indeed guilty of coercing Duo. He wouldn't be a Preventer at all if Zechs hadn't dragged him into it. That it had been necessitated by Tropic's plotting didn't change what had happened. At the least, Zechs could be charged with using his relationship with Duo to bias his decisions. But, he thought, even the way Patel had worded that statement seemed to indicate the IG were leaning toward a certain interpretation. If Duo felt pressured to assure everyone he hadn't been coerced, it was the same as doing it again. It was enough to give Zechs a headache.

Duo had nodded his understanding. He seemed to be concentrating very hard, wetting his lips repeatedly, rubbing his hand on his thigh. He gulped at his water and then seemed to forget it entirely.

'If you need a break at any time,' said Carby, 'please just say so. No penalties for going to the bathroom.'

Duo smiled jaggedly, and Zechs was heartened to see that. 'Understood, sir.'

'Let's start with the basics,' said the older woman, Gierdre Appleman. 'Your name?'

'Duo Maxwell.'
'I understand your name has a bit of an unusual story behind it?'

'I don't know about unusual, ma'am. It's not, it--' Duo grabbed his water and swallowed. 'I don't
know my birth name, assuming I had one. I chose these.'

'You were at Maxwell Orphanage when it was destroyed?'

'Yes.' Duo's face abruptly went blank, but he answered readily enough. 'So far as I know I'm the
sole survivor.'

'So far as you know?

'I've never trusted a single word out of Alliance mouths, pardon my vehemence. If they told me the
sky was blue I'd want to see the data. But I guess I've never had the means of finding out if it's true
or not.'

'Fair enough.' Patel made a note for himself, but then folded his hands across the notepad, pen
resting on crossed thumbs. 'We've undertaken a review of the terms of your parole following your
incarceration and trial for a rather interesting stack of crimes during and following the war and the
Barton Rebellion. You seem to have navigated the restrictions with good faith.'

'I did try,' Duo said, with a certain weary resignation. 'We both did. Me and Heero.'

'Mr Yuy's motivations are generally beyond the scope of our hearing,' Carby said gently. 'Though,
if you don't mind some personal advice, Agent Maxwell, I don't think you can truthfully say that
Mr Yuy was trying. I believe that you believed he was, at the time, wouldn't that be more
accurate?'

Duo accepted that with a duck of his head. 'Yes. That would be, um, more accurate.'

They weren't here to catch Duo in mis-statements or impassioned self-defence. Zechs could hardly
express the relief he felt, but he did feel it, a hard upsurge of gratitude. Even when the realisation
followed that if they spared Duo, they would surely come down all the harder on himself and
Preventers through him. But they saw Duo as a victim caught in something he hadn't been
powerful enough to avoid, and that was the best possible outcome for Duo.

'It was only in the last two years that you’d been granted unmonitored home internet access?' Deva
Mitsopoulos asked.

'Yeah. Yes. I applied for permission so Heero, Mr Yuy, could enroll in online courses at the
university.'

'At that time, Mr Yuy was your flatmate?'

'Yes. He moved out like nine months after that. And he did have permission to do that, and to
maintain his network access, though he took my computer with him. It had all his stuff on the local
drives and I didn't need it.'

'And it was on your computer but his network access that the first intrusion from Agent Tropic,
then unknown, was captured.' Patel accepted Duo's nod as answer. 'And at that point, Preventers
moved on the threat against you and the Princess Relena of Sanq by establishing on-site security in
your flat, and in your workplace?'

'Yeah,' Duo said. 'That's how I met Zechs.'
That was not uncalculated. Duo struck a deliberately casual tone with that, not adding Zechs' surname, and deliberately inviting the question that, sure enough, followed immediately.

'And became romantically involved?' Mitsopoulos asked.

Duo's grin was a little too pointed. 'I'm not a total slut, ma'am, but look at him. Obviously I asked him out.'

No-one seemed quite sure if they were allowed to laugh at that. It was Carby who chuckled first, and even Patel smiled a little bit then, particularly when he noticed Zechs blushing.

'He's good,' Sally murmured. 'That was well done.'

'When did you become romantically involved, then?'

'I guess by Christmas. Early December, I mean. There was the thing with the GHB.'

'When Agent Tropic drugged your drink.' Patel consulted his notes. 'You were hospitalised?'

'Zechs recognised the signs, I guess. He got me to the hospital, yeah. They were able to test for GHB poisoning.'

'Were you aware at that time that Agent Tropic was the perpetrator?'

'No. I didn't even know he existed then. I thought Zechs was partnered with Rebeka. Agent Neptune. Heero had met her once with Zechs and she came with Zechs to ask me questions right after I got out of hospital.'

'Following your attack, Mr Yuy moved back in with you, correct?'

'I thought he was being overprotective, but you gotta understand what it's been like for him here. Paranoia isn't out of bounds when you consider that most of the city and definitely all of the government didn't want us here. In the beginning, there was so much publicity around the trial.' Duo's eyes dropped to his hand on the table, slowly tracing a circle with a fingertip. 'We couldn't go out without being recognised. We were on the train, once, and this woman started screaming at us, about being killers, baby killers. It was awful. Even though the conductor acknowledged she was the one making the scene, he asked us to get off at the next stop. It was always like that. I arranged to have groceries delivered but half the time they'd send us rotten food, or messed up the order. Our building was always getting shit-- stuff done to it. Our first landlord kicked us out and charged us for damages. The second one was nicer about it, but we still only made it six months there before people knew who we were and made it clear they didn't want us around.

'And getting a job was really hard,' he added then, 'finding someone who would hire a Gundam Pilot, for one, and then deal with all the harassment afterward. Heero couldn't deal with it. He'd get so frustrated and upset. And he was messed up, he was so messed up after the Barton Rebellion. He should have been in a hospital that whole time we were held in the Asylum Centre, when they were putting him on trial. Six different doctors signed an affidavit that he needed constant treatment and wasn't getting it. He couldn't even deal with me sometimes. Working at least got me out of the flat when it was too toxic.' Duo bit his lips together, though what he was holding in Zechs couldn't imagine. 'But he's my best friend. He was my only friend, during all of that. And it means a lot to him when I listen to his advice, when I take him seriously about his instincts for trouble, and he was right, after all. And frankly it means a lot to me that he cares that much about me, to want to protect me himself.'

Sally sighed softly. 'He just answered their real question,' she whispered. 'Why Heero went flying
to the rescue the night Duo killed Olsen, and why Duo let Heero hide the body.'

The panel had arrived at that conclusion, as well. It was the young black man who spoke it. 'That leads directly to the question of what Heero Yuy did with Olsen's body, Agent Maxwell. You've stated for the record that you don't know?'

Duo's instinct was clearly to return some of that protection. Heero had sanctuary in Sanq, it was true, but there were several crimes of varying degree in what Heero had done. But Duo answered, eventually, with honesty. 'He didn't tell me,' he said. 'And I didn't ask.'

'I think that's fairly understandable, in the heat of the moment. And you didn't have any further contact with him after you were removed from Germany by the Preventers?'

'Just a couple of words on the phone once I was back in Brussels. I knew he had left Germany too, but I don't know exactly how far he'd gone or whether he was all the way back to Sanq. I know he had borrowed a plane to get to me so I'd assume he had to stick close to it, but that's all guesswork.'

'Agent Maxwell, I would like to ask you about Árni Olsen, if I could.'

Duo blinked in the silence after that. 'Oh. Yeah. Yes. Please.'

'Thank you. We're satisfied with your testimony to Preventers about the events surrounding your kidnapping and his death. And I'm satisfied as to why you initially tried to conceal Mr Yuy's involvement. But I'd like to hear, now, how you felt about having to use deadly force.'

'How I felt?'

'Yes, if you would. Take your time. How you felt in the moment. How you felt afterward. How you feel now, reflecting on those events.'

Zechs doubted anyone had prepped Duo on this issue. Inspectors General, were usually more concerned with timelines, with the facts of events, with responsibility. In his own deposition Zechs had been asked a great many questions about his failure to recognise Duo's attempt to pass information by phone during the kidnapping, and his mental acrobatics to realising Troyes and Yuy had been connected and that Yuy had gone to Duo's rescue. They'd questioned his state of mind, certainly, but they hadn't gone so far as to ask him how he felt. What were they after?

'Sick,' Duo said finally, with a strained sideways glance at the large crowd, to the video camera. 'I felt sick. Because I could tell he wasn't going to stop, and he could have killed Rebeka, he was going to kill me. And-- I guess because I knew I could kill him first. It's one thing to want to kill someone, and I didn't want to, but he did, and that carries you a long way, but he hadn't ever killed anyone before. I had. Never like-- like that. That close. But, I knew I could. I knew when we were fighting that I was trying to kill him, so he would stop, so he wouldn't come after us. I didn't know for sure if I'd done it, and afterward-- I was-- I was sick a little at the farmhouse, when it was all over and that family were helping us.' His cheeks reddened, and he picked at a ragged fingernail, eyes falling. 'I, uh. Neptune was out of it, she didn't see. Heero did. He didn't make fun of me or anything, but I felt-- weak. Like--' He was starting to struggle, now, his voice hoarser, and from his angle Zechs thought Duo's eyes might be wet, from the way Duo clenched his fists to white knuckles in repetitious spasms. 'I was never sick during the war. But I thought the war was over. I didn't think I'd ever have to do anything like that again. I guess I didn't like it. Hated it, kind of. But it had to happen, I did it, so. So I guess that's it.'

'Thank you, Agent. I appreciate that was difficult to speak about. Just one more question from me, if the rest of you don't mind?' Patel shook his head, and Carby folded his hands over his pad again.
'How do you feel about being an agent in Preventers?'

Duo was disciplined enough not to look at Zechs. But it took him a minute to answer, nonetheless. 'I understand the legalities of it,' he said carefully, and Zechs felt a twist in his gut. Yes, Duo did. And the unspoken answer was written all over his tense, miserable body language. Duo wasn't capable of that kind of lie, even to protect Zechs, who had pushed him to accept a mad, last-minute plot to catch Tropic and avoid a lengthy imprisonment. 'I... appreciate why it was the best solution.'

'Just a little bit about how it makes you feel, Mr Maxwell.'

'I don't want to,' Duo said. 'Feel. About it. I guess that's my answer.'

Patel closed questioning then, with a quiet word of thanks to Duo. 'Thank you for your time, Agent. We have nothing further.'

Duo rose to his feet uncertainly. 'That's it?'

'Yes.' Patel smiled at him. Duo returned it with an unhappy twitch of the lips. 'We appreciate you flying out. We'll have you back to the airport in record time, I believe.'

And how. For a deposition that short, they could have conducted it by televideo. Duo's furrowed brow spoke less of suspicion than the fear he was missing some important byplay. But he nodded, accepting his dismissal, and left with only a lingering glance at Zechs and Sally.

Sally rose as well, her face displaying nothing but cool confidence. 'May we adjourn for a private conversation?' she asked Patel, and was walking as soon as he agreed, headed for the side door and the small adjoining anteroom where they'd be away from so many watching eyes.

Only Patel and Carby followed, of the panel, and Sally swept them both with a long look. 'I want to be clear I'm not interfering in your investigation,' she said, as Zechs closed the door behind them and took up a folded-arm stance against it, for the moment unobserved as Sally faced off her IG team. 'But I would like to know what that was about, if you can discuss it.'

Carby replied. 'The full response will be in the report, of course, Director, but, off the record, we will be making a recommendation specifically about Agent Maxwell's employment.'

Zechs couldn't stop himself. 'You realise if he's cut from Preventers he'll be jailed.'

'I realise it's a possibility, yes,' Carby said. 'I also realise, as you don't seem to, that Duo Maxwell shouldn't be anywhere near the field.'

'He's more than answered for his conduct with Olsen, and you have to take into account his restraint until Olsen escalated--'

'We do,' Patel interrupted soothingly.

'But you heard him just now,' Carby added. 'He felt sick. And he made an extremely emotional decision about allowing Yuy to hide the body for him, for reasons I'm not convinced he even fully understands. What I heard him say is that he didn't trust his own judgment in that situation. That he still doesn't, because he's continuing to allow others to make decisions for him. You, sir, for instance.'

Sally put out a quelling hand. 'I backed Deputy Director Merquise in bringing Maxwell on under exigent circumstances, as per our charter.'
'And you should also back our recommendation to remove Maxwell from the Corps,' Carby said simply. He looked them both in the eye. 'I've been reading up on Small Arms. The organisation Maxwell is involved in, which you're taking as your model for the new initiative with child soldiers. I wonder if you've done any research, yourselves? Because, if you had, I think you'd see this as clearly as I do. Putting Maxwell in a position to commit further violence is tantamount to endangering him and endangering anyone with him when bullets start flying.'

'He passed a psychological assessment during Basic Training.'

'Yes, Director, an assessment which judges capability, not long-term emotional health. He's not fit for the position. That's the recommendation I'll be making. Through no fault of his own, and in full understanding of the troubled context which produced his unique problems and the good intentions you had in trying to extricate him from something he didn't choose and couldn't prevent, but he's not fit.'

'We've got two more depositions today,' Patel reminded them, with a judicious glance at his watch. 'Why don't we save further discussion on this issue til the afternoon? We're nearing the end on this, and you'll of course have review of the preliminary report. We should be ready to issue that by the end of the week.'

'I look forward to it,' Sally said, and Zechs barely held in a grunt of sour agreement. And how.

But the report, when it came, wasn't as bad as Zechs had feared it might be. He and Sally poured over their copies individually, marking liberally in the margins of the printed ream, and then began to compare notes. The executive summary was still in draft, but it would be released to the public where the classified details of the actual investigation would not be, and it was critical for Preventers that the grim failures be balanced with both their successes and their plans to better the Corps. In a meagre five pages, the Inspector General had painted a picture of an organisation under unendurable stress and at times blithely unaware that disaster lurked behind every new expenditure of field agents. Some of Sally's points had been made: they were understaffed and overextended, pulled in too many directions due to an overly broad mission purview. The IG added to that a factor Zechs had raised, that their mission objectives did not provide Preventers a means of reliably liaising with local police and national intelligence agencies, which could have relieved Preventers' shortfalls. Any support agreements were short-term and ended with the particular case which had initiated them, and-- Heero Yuy and his datasets in mind, Zechs had testified to the spotty state of information available to Preventers, most of it data that was only voluntarily supplied, not mandated, and that Preventers didn't even have their own data processing to merge disparate inputs for analysis.

Zechs' brutal mea culpa had been translated to a general statement of inadequacies in training, scheduling, and case tracking. The classified report had all the detail he'd provided of his many mistakes, of being pulled between the bombing on L4, the trafficking case in Syria, Relena's protection, the Gundam Pilots' involvement, haring off to Sanq to personally supervise Tropic's capture. Agents, particularly commanding officers, the report recommended, were entirely inadequate to a task that would have overwhelmed a superhuman, and expectations for caseload, regional territory, and regular training in skills like time management, advanced forensics and interview techniques, tactical surveillance, and, Zechs was embarrassed to see, situational leadership and emotional intelligence in the workplace training. That they had pulled a significant number of their agents from law enforcement and military didn't excuse a failure to plan for their transition to a corps that had long transitioned away from both those realms. The report quite fairly noted that Preventers had never had the time to stop and breathe and reassess, but it was a failure nonetheless.
The recommendations section was lengthy and fulsome. Zechs couldn't disagree with most of what the IG had put to pen. They had recommended a staffing increase in the thousands, with a corresponding increase in officers who would lead smaller teams-- a model already employed in the colonies, who had problems of their own left over from decades of a menacing relationship between armed authorities and a restive populace disinclined toward foreign powers. Rather surprisingly the IG had recommended that Zechs continue in place as Deputy Director, even going so far as to praise his candour, but chided him for his personal involvement with his cases, a rebuke that quietly covered Relena as well as Duo. They also wanted him out of the field, and recommended he adopt a rotating schedule through all established stations that would have him hopping every three months.

'Great,' he said, without enthusiasm. 'I can be exhausted in entirely new ways.'

'I see what they're doing, but not that it would be especially helpful. Three months is barely enough time to settle in, much less gain local trust and fully review cases.' Sally chewed the tip of her pen. 'Counter with a proposal for a rotation every other six months, with you in Brussels half the year and a different posting the rest of the year. I need a deputy who doesn't totally disappear. And put a cap on this. After a few years we'll delegate it down to all those new officers we'll have.'

And, buried in the many pages of recommendations, there it was:

_The use of Clause 18(c)(7) of the Preventer Corps Charter (see: Temporary Appointment Agents) has resulted in the employment of certain individuals who would otherwise have faced arrest, imprisonment, or, at the least, social approbation for their involvement in various political or military movements which participated in war-related activities. In its earliest days this clause served to recruit skilled individuals with experience in mobile suit piloting and armed conflict, or individuals with valuable connections to otherwise hostile communities. However, the continued use of this clause to liberate at-risk individuals from lawful confinement results in imperfect integration in Preventers, a public perception that the Preventers Corps is “above the law” or unwilling to abide by laws which restrain its desires, and poses a significant risk to those individuals thus press-ganged into the Corps. Faced with imprisonment or employment, these individuals cannot be blamed for choosing employment, but can be expected to flounder rather than thrive. As Preventers does not, at this time, have sufficient support services for at-risk agents, it is alarming that only minimal screening procedures apply to agents onboarded through Clause 18(c)(7), even in cases in which these individuals have been previously flagged as persons of concern or persons of interest in casework. It is the recommendation of this panel that use of this clause be further reviewed by external as well as internal parties empowered to revise or remove the clause from the Charter should such be necessitated. As for the individuals already employed in Preventers through the use of this clause, it is recommended that they be immediately removed from the field, pending any ameliorative action which may be required to address the great variance of their situations. Any instability or irregularity poses a danger to the Corps, a grim reality most recently highlighted by the arrest of Agent Tropic.'_

Zechs read aloud, and drew a deep shaking breath. He'd been sure that sentence was going to end with Duo's name, but they'd protected him. Duo was who they meant, that was absolutely clear to Zechs, but they'd substituted Tropic as a straw man, preserving Duo's anonymity. That was a blessing. That was a very big blessing.

'I saw that,' Sally said. She offered a small smile. 'Carby must have done a lot of reading about Small Arms. Singling Duo out would have stuck a target on his back. A thousand people will see this report even before it's redacted for public release.'

'And who knows how many Preventers might share Tropic's feelings about the Gundam Pilots.'
Zechs dropped his head to rest on the cushion of Sally's couch. 'I'm finding it hard to argue with most of this.'

'Me, too.' Sally tossed the report onto her desk and sat back to run her hands through her hair, sighing deeply. 'Une got out at the right time,' she said moodily. 'All the glory of forming us, none of the shame of doing most of it on the fly. I probably won't last much longer as Director.'

'There's nothing in here criticising you in particular,' Zechs said, surprised.

'No, but it's all happened on my tenure, and even if I personally turned it all around in a year the taint would linger.' She grimaced. 'The existence of a report is bad enough, but it's the scandal that'll do me in. This will be public. You ready for it?'

'No,' Zechs said honestly, and earned a small quirk of Sally's lips. 'Still. We've made our start. All we can do is see it through.'

'True,' she answered. 'True. All right, then. Sharpen that pencil. Let's start drafting our reply.'

**

Duo was frowning at his computer screen. His partner said something, and he nodded, but the line between his brows deepened, rather than fade. He typed something, and reached for a cup beside his keyboard. Whatever it contained, it resulted in a pinched face of distaste. Duo binned the entire thing immediately.

Zechs found a smile for that. He left his spot by the door, and began to cross the floor of Sanq's Preventers Station.

But he slowed almost as soon as he began. Someone had beat him to Duo's side, carrying a carafe and a fresh cup. Troyes Lefèvre. He added sugar and cream, and laughed at something Duo's partner Agent Ingefaer said to him, and refreshed her mug on demand as well.

The Inspector General report had largely avoided their open case work. That didn't mean Troyes Lefèvre wasn't still a problem, and one Zechs had yet to solve. It was, perhaps, meaningless that Lefèvre was here for a visit. Zechs had bonded with Duo in a moment of adversity, and could not complain if another man did as well. He just couldn't trust it, and wondered again if he ought to tell Duo what Tropic had said about Lefèvre being a sleeper spy for the colonials. If it wasn't true, it deprived Duo of one of the few friends who had reason and freedom to help him settle in at Sanq, with Heero devoting most of his time to his fiance and the other Gundam Pilots busy or already planning to return to their homes.

He didn't know what to do, so he did what he'd already been doing-- watching, and not interfering.

But he did finish his journey, since he'd been noticed by a few of the Sanqian Preventers, and word was going about. 'Sir,' someone greeted him, and Duo looked up, lit up, and then obviously tried not to.
'Good morning, Agents,' Zechs greeted Duo and his partner. 'Mr Lefèvre. I hope Princess Relena's well.'

'Very well, sir,' Lefèvre answered with courtesy and no warmth. And no elaboration. Duo glanced up at him, and back to Zechs.

Well, it was Duo Zechs had come to talk to. 'Update on the new threats against the Princess?' Zechs opened, pulling up a chair that was quickly offered by a Preventer at a nearby desk.

Ingefaer responded to that first, angling her screen toward his view and bringing up the case file. 'We found some web traffic on a couple of message boards that uses similar language, sir. We're looking into the identities of the posters, which led us to a blogger who goes by Francis Assisi.'

'Patron saint of peace?' Zechs guessed.

'Actually, mostly poverty,' Duo said. 'And birds. He started off as a soldier and had a religious conversion, but he wasn't what you'd call a Pacifist, since he supported the Crusades. Raised in a Catholic orphanage,' he said, when Ingefaer raised an eyebrow.

'Well, I doubt these fanatics are much concerned with historic accuracy. What's Mr Assisi have to say?'

'The usual garbage.' Duo tapped a thick stack of paper on his desk. 'We're going through it, but the only interesting thing is that it sounds an awful lot like the shit Árni Olsen and his daddy were spewing. There's one thing that's new: a lot of talk about a Second Kingdom. That familiar at all? We asked for a transcript of what Tropic said when he talked to the Princess, but that fell into a black hole as soon as we put down the phone.'

'Off the record, there is a transcript available,' Zechs said slowly, glancing up at Lefèvre, who had absented himself a few steps away so as not to overhear private matters, but not sufficiently far away to guarantee he wasn't listening. 'Every Preventer in the room was wearing comm units, but there was no official recording, out of deference to the reputation of the Princess and the privacy of the Gundam Pilots present. I can look into getting you a copy, but I can't promise it won't come to you redacted for content. Not sure how useful that would be. But I can say, having been there myself, Tropic didn't say anything about a Second Kingdom.'

'I think they're using it as a metaphor, not a place or a specific idea even,' Duo said. 'Like Heaven, you know. It's not really a physical thing, but everyone's got their own vision of what it's supposed to be. What I think is interesting about this Second Kingdom stuff is that they clearly see Relena ruling it.'

'We knew they were focussed on her.'

'Yeah, but as the ruler of Sanq. As an icon of the Pacifist movement which arose specifically out of Sanq's traditions. This Second Kingdom stuff is something else, or at least I think it is. Ingy doesn't.'

'Ingy' rolled her eyes just a bit at that nickname, but replied readily. 'I think it's just code for Sanq. "Second" and "Sanq" aren't that far apart.'

'In English,' Duo said. 'Which, yes, that's what this Assisi dupe is using, but I also think he's not a native English speaker. His sentences are a little too consciously constructed and he writes like someone who's used to a formal and informal mode of speech, which English doesn't do so well.'

Zechs nodded at that, but was thinking of something else entirely-- that removing Duo from
fieldwork was going to lose them a very good mind. But there was no putting that off, and the
decision had already been made. All that remained was informing Duo's commander, who was not
going to be pleased at re-arranging her caseload again after having just done it a month ago.

But there was no shirking the duty, and no time like the present. 'Good work,' Zechs said, and
rose. 'Keep at it. Agent Maxwell, could I borrow you a moment?'

'Oh. Sure.' Duo stood. 'Um, am I-- sure. Following. Lead the way.'

Zechs chose the file room for their conversation, as it had a door that would shut and keep their
discussion private. Duo poked idly at the copy machine and settled against it with his eyes roving
everywhere but to Zechs, scratching at the rim of his cast at his hand.

'Is that almost ready to come off?' Zechs asked.

'Yeah. Next week. Not a moment too soon, it's driving me fucking nuts.' Duo cleared his throat.
'Um, is this personal, or--'

'Personal or-- ' Zechs echoed. 'I--' He hesitated.

'Are you going to do that thing where you just repeat whatever I said?' Duo finally met his eyes,
biting his lip against a smile. 'I think I missed that.'

Zechs swallowed. 'Professional,' he managed. 'I wanted to thank you for your deposition with the
IG. They're about ready to publish their report.'

'Yeah, I heard.'

'Commander Ulv will be the next to hear this, but I thought it was only fair you hear it first. They
want to pull everyone who was brought into Preventers as a Temporary Appointment Agent from
active fieldwork.'

Duo blinked at that. 'How many people is that?'

'About seventy, seventy-five. A few who were brought in that way have already left Preventers--
Chang Wufei, for instance. The majority are colonial, so that's going to go down like a lead
balloon. You. Me, for that matter, though they wanted me out of the field for other reasons,
mostly to focus on the bureaucracy.'

'Oh.' Duo picked at his cast. He didn't say anything for a while, and Zechs didn't press him to
talk. 'So, I'm going back to prison?'

'No,' Zechs said quietly. 'You're still a Preventer. We don't quite have it figured out yet, but I
wouldn't let that happen. And God knows what Heero would do if he heard that.'

Duo didn't laugh at that joke, and Zechs supposed it wasn't much of a joke, anyway. Duo was
chewing his lip, now, and from the way he blinked Zechs thought he was attacking the problem
with all his considerable mental might. 'You're going to move me entirely to the THC?'

'THC? The Transitory Health Centre? Yes. If you think you can do that.'

'Yeah. I mean, I guess I have to. I've never-- I've never run anything before. That's a big step from
part-time regional manager.'

'You should have been on it full-time from the beginning. And there's nothing saying you can't ask
for help. Pieter van den Broeck would answer any questions you had, you know that.' Zechs let himself slump a little against a file cabinet. 'Duo, I need to apologise. The IG report is right. We shoved you at active duty because we never thought about anything else. Because, all along, that's where we wanted the Gundam Pilots. It's one of the first things you ever said to me, that Preventers don't need soldiers to play war. You were more right than you know about our misconceptions.'

'It's okay.'

'It's not,' Zechs said. 'And we will try to redress it. One of the actions we've promised to make will at least put us on the right road. We're bringing on a contractor to provide counselling. You'll be first on her list.'

'What-- therapy?' Duo said incredulously. 'I don't need therapy!'

'I think you do. I think you have for a while, that Tropic set off a lot of it, but especially after what Árni Olsen did to you, what having to kill him did to you.' He overrode Duo's protest. 'Do you know the signs of post-traumatic stress, Duo?'

'Post--' Duo stared at him, bewildered. 'No, I don't-- I don't fucking know. I don't have post- whatever stress.'

'Outbursts of anger, constantly being on edge. Always on guard for danger. Trouble sleeping. Hopelessness about your future. Guilt and shame.'

Duo's face had taken on a stiff cast. He struggled to meet Zechs' eyes. 'I don't. I'm not.'

'I think you are. I think a lot of the fault is mine, for not seeing the signs earlier. For needing to be told you were hurting by a lawyer who only met you for ten minutes.' Zechs put out a hand before he quite thought about it, but Duo responded, it seemed, automatically, and once he had Duo's hand he pulled the rest of Duo near, wrapping arms about him gently. 'For assuming you were fine because you were looking after Heero so responsibly, for assuming you were okay because I didn't have the time to deal with you not being okay. And for forcing you into Preventers because I needed a fast solution.'

'You did what you had to do. I was just a little piece of all that crap.' Duo propped his chin on Zechs' collarbone to look up at him. 'I know that.'

'You shouldn't have to be understanding all the time.' Duo was so close, and smelled so familiar. His hand was curling in Duo's hair before he could tell himself not to, and Duo's lips, bitten and red, were slightly parted, already turned up to him. He gave in with only a moment of resignation. Their kiss was lingering and soft. When he would have stopped himself, Duo came after him, and so he cupped Duo by the jaw and did it properly. 'Just try the counselling,' he whispered against Duo's cheek.

Duo pushed away. 'The fact that I don't want to?'

'I've forced you into worse. I won't feel badly about ordering you to sit on a couch for an hour a week and talk to a nice lady.'

'An hour a week?'

'That's an example, not a promise. Duo. Honestly. You really think it would be that bad, someone wanting to help you? Try it. Please.'
'Kiss me again and I'll think about it.'

He obeyed. But took that as Duo's word. The tremor in Duo's hands, the damp palm clasping his told him that much. Duo would do his thinking, and arrive at the right conclusions. He was too smart not to.

'I have to break the news to Ulv,' Zechs said then, withdrawing tenderly. 'But then I think you need a trip to the palace. Quatre's out of hospital today. You've got the afternoon and tomorrow off to see him before he flies home.'

'Back to normal, huh.'

'No,' Zechs said. 'But figuring out a new normal. Gives us more chance to get it right.'

Duo's hand squeezed his tight. 'That,' he said. 'That's what I missed. The way you do that.'

'I know, love.'
'Hey,' Duo greeted his phone call sleepily.

'Hey.' Zechs smiled at the stars, faint winks of diamond against the midnight sky. 'Did I wake you?'

'Nah. Kinda. Fell asleep on the couch.' There were scratches of sound, Duo moving some vast pile, Zechs imagined, of paper files, books full of research, maps, medical charts. Duo sent him the occasional image text of his office with helpless labels like 'Kafka wuz here'. That the mess would follow Duo home was a given. 'Did you know night-time teevee is total crap?'

'I thought you only watched the news.'

'I like the noise.'

Noise in an empty flat. That was a given, too. Zechs knew Duo had lived alone, for at least some period of time after Heero had moved out of their shared apartment in Brussels. That wasn't the same as being okay with it, given everything that had happened in the past year. Zechs had missed the noise of someone puttering in the kitchen, rustling the sheets beside him in the bed. The worst was the passing realisation that he often didn't miss it, though. He'd been alone a lot longer than Duo, and falling back into a bachelor's habits was no great hardship.

'How've you been?' Duo asked then, and Zechs tipped back his chair, propping his feet on the rooftop's ledge.

'I'm all right,' Zechs said. 'How's the French boyfriend?'

'There is no French boyfriend,' Duo grumbled. He let a couple of breaths pass. 'I was going to tell you about the party. Guess you saw that stupid thing in the paper.'

'I liked seeing you out and about. You look good in a tux.'

'It was a just-friends thing. He didn't even pay for drinks.'

'Duo,' Zechs said, and the line fell silent. 'It's okay,' Zechs told him. 'I want you to have friends.'

This time the silence lasted almost a full minute. He didn't suspect Duo of falling asleep, not in the middle of their increasingly rare calls. They missed more appointments than they made, lately. If the reasons were social, at least on Duo's part, Zechs told himself again he was glad of it. Duo deserved it.

Zechs broke the quiet, attempting a light-hearted tone. 'Finalised the bachelor party plans yet?'

'Ugh, God.' Duo let out a willing enough laugh. 'I couldn't get permits for the gun range through
"all the red tape, so it's paintball instead. It's more politically correct anyway. Then he's making me eat fast food. Who in their right mind refuses an invitation to the best restaurants in the capital? We could be at the chef's table at Rouge, but we'll be eating burgers scraped off a greasy grill in some fry joint.'

'It sounds like Heero's dream date.'

'Yeah, he's thrilled.' Duo chuckled again. 'And I can't complain too much. At least I don't have to suffer through whatever insane hen night Dorothy Catalonia's coming up with.'

'Don't remind me,' Zechs muttered, rolling his eyes and knowing Duo would hear it in his tone. 'Believe me, I'm not alone in wishing Relena had more female friends.'

'She hates Troyes. Like, to his face. He's terrified of her. Legit, man.'

'Definitely legit.' Zechs brushed away his hair as the breeze tossed it into his face. 'How's work?'

'It's good. Challenging. How's deputising?'

'Same. Neptune asked me to pass on her love.'

'Any progress on that Assisi nutjob and the Second Kingdom shit?'

'Not much. At this point it's hard to tell if this is even as dangerous as what happened with Tropic. We interviewed him--' 'I hope with the business end of a taser.'

'He was more forthcoming than you might think. I get the impression he made all the moves he wanted to make and he's at peace with the outcome.'

'That kind of pisses me off.'

'Me, too.' Zechs feathered his hair away from his forehead again. 'He's still so self-righteously sure of himself. It makes my trigger finger itch whenever I'm in the room with him. But I don't get the impression he's lying to us on behalf of any conspiracy or cabal of crazies out there. I still think it's more of that radical Pacifism, but I don't know if it's a movement or a plot.'

Duo said, 'Recent events would suggest it's smarter for us to act like it's a plot.'

And how. 'I know,' he replied. 'But I don't know if there's anywhere to go with it beyond vigilance right now.'

'So we wait.' Duo sighed. 'I hate waiting. Did you like the last playlist I sent you?'

Obligingly Zechs accepted the subject change. 'A little heavy on the electronika for my taste.'

'You said you liked it at the club.'

'I liked dancing to it with you. Small difference.'

'Okay, criticism heard and incorporated. The next one will be all smooth jazz.'

He laughed. He couldn't help it. 'I miss you,' he said, the words just slipping out in spontaneous affection. As soon as they tripped off the tongue he regretted it. There was no easy boundary, no mutually acknowledged limits, but that edged right up to the things he tried not to say beyond the
confines of his own head. It just made things harder on both of them.

He could hear Duo swallow. Duo didn't say it back, which meant he had more self-control than Zechs; Zechs hoped that was the only reason. Visions of French boyfriends would always plague him, and he was more or less resigned to hearing one day not too far off that the worst had finally come true. If Duo moved on, there could be no blame in it. They lived six hours apart, only the one of them authorized to travel freely as a civilian, and that only in the little bit of personal time he could wring away from his job. Weekend plans were fantasy more than promise. Holidays had a tendency to vanish into last-minute shoot-outs with whatever group of malcontents made a play for world domination that day. Relena's wedding would be their only firm date in months. Zechs would stand with his sister as Duo would for Heero, guaranteeing them a walk down the aisle and a night of champagne-fuelled wedding duties that probably wouldn't spare them much time for each other. It wasn't enough, and it was getting harder to pretend they didn't mind the distance.

'We got this kid in the other day,' Duo said abruptly. 'He's nine. Totally mute. Not medical, just, like, he doesn't talk. It happens sometimes. Hard to treat him if you don't know what's going on, though, right. I spent a couple hours with him today. Gave him one of the teddy bears. I don't think he'd ever seen one before. We let him out into the playroom with the other pre-teens. He just kind of sat there for a while, I guess it was overwhelming. I got distracted, there was a telecon. When I come back, he's punched out a twelve year old who's like twenty pounds heavier than him and he's standing there with bloody knuckles and this look, like, I just dare you, I just dare you. He'd given the bear to a little girl and the older kid tried to take it without permission.'

'Did you discipline him?' Zechs wondered.

'How? Tell him not to solve problems with his fists? Tell him we've got more toys? I was so proud of him I almost gave him a medal.' Duo sucked in a jagged breath. 'I don't know if I'm the right person for this work. I'm so afraid of fucking up.'

'You understood him. Empathy is important.'

'And I'm just standing there tongue-tied and it's like, it's like-- it's like I start thinking, shit, you know, that's me. That's been me as long as I can remember. And I'm thinking is that how you see me? Some punk kid who doesn't know how not to hit when something goes wrong?'

'It's a lot of your charm, Duo. And you do know how not to hit. This kid will learn, too.'

'Just-- say something else, would you? Tell me what to do.'

'Like what?' Zechs pushed his hair back again and hunched over in his chair, cradling the phone to his ear with his shoulder. 'There's no right answer. There's no magic spell. You're the one who said it was spice. History.'

'Spice, yeah. I remember.'

'Everyone's messed up, Duo. Everyone's just trying to figure it out. None of us get it right all the time.'

'God, Zechs, I don't need a platitude. Tell me something real.'

Zechs closed his eyes. It wasn't frustration. Or not frustration about work and platitudes. 'I miss you,' he said again, and Duo went on breathing, short shallow breaths on the other end of the line.

'I'm waiting, you know,' Duo whispered, then, and Zechs nodded, throat too tight for speech. 'I am waiting. You gotta have hope.'
'Will it be worth it,' he managed, a crushed whisper.

'You are,' Duo said, and it wasn't hope in that, it was faith. 'I gotta go. Early day tomorrow. Zechs. Be good.'

'You too. Duo--'

'Love you too,' Duo said, and hung up.

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