

CHAPTER ONE:

The thunder crashed and Trowa sat up in alarm. His breath; heavy and ragged as he gasped to breathe in the humid and stifling heat of his tent. Sweat poured from his pores and ran into his eyes still dilated from the night and burning as the salt mixed with his fearful tears.

Another nightmare had come, another night of terror and tears to rob him of rest, and another jolted waking without the comfort of remembering the dreams that plagued his slumber night after night.

Just shadows remained, images burned into frightening clarity into his mind's eye.

A mountain on fire, death and pestilence burning its stench into the night sky and bodies writhing in agony, convulsing in the throws of death's talons.

A flightless angel with ragged robes, his halo tarnished and stained with blood. Fighting as he bled from a gaping wound in his side.

A demon with his cloak draped like a shroud over a fallen comrade, weeping tears of pain, mixing with the dirt and gore on his face.

A flame serpent scale clad Warrior, his stern face solid with anger and rage. Carrying the body of a fallen woman, hardly more than a child, revenge and hatred burning behind his dark eyes.

Trowa's own hands, soaked with a mixture of his own blood, and the blood of the unknown enemy.

Clans fighting over the barren wasteland, men and women falling all around in disembodied chaos.

No reasoning nor purpose, no cause could he foresee or remember, only the images to be felt with nauseating surety.

For the past six months these dreams had come.

Ever the same in their carnage and consternation, ever the same in their indeterminate warning.

Trowa pushed sticky tendrils of his sweat-permeated hair from his face, and unfolded long limbs from his sleeping mat and threw open his tent flap. Letting the raging storm outside wash away the residue of unquenchable fear from his lithe body.

The harsh sting of wind whipped droplets of rain purging him of the tremors that wracked his form upon waking.

Here on the steppes of the country called Rhye, settled along the southern border where the tall grasses swept immeasurable plains, Trowa's clan wandered. Tending their herd-beast flocks as they wandered the ancient trails, the herds grazing on the drying stalks of grasses during late summer. This was his homeland and where lived the Tribal Clans known as the Bartonese.

Their symbol, recognized throughout Rhye was not that of the beasts they tended, but rather the beasts they must protect their herds from. Hidden within the tall grasses, the predators lay. Golden as the waving seas of plant life, laying in wait for an easy meal or an errant stray traveler. Moving across the steppes and plains in family groups, stalking the herds and the Tribes with infinite patience.

Majestic creatures, as graceful and poetic as they were deadly, undisputed kings and queens roaming the plains endlessly. Fearing no one and nothing. They had but one enemy among those that they called prey. The one in a thousand men born to be their master, the one who could speak their language and turn them away or subdue them with but a touch on the senses. Trowa was such a man born. A man the Bartonese called "Beast-Tamer", but to the other clans that made up the vast world of Rhye he was known as an "Accursed Fire Born". Mutant abilities brought on by the great wars that had devastated the entire planet, reducing it to nothing more than ruins and decaying earth.

Blessings and curses born and formed and bred from a time when war was humanities downfall, when Great civilizations were lost in but a breath, as the fires of hell had rained down destruction. When the four Goddess of the North, South, East and West came to Rhye bringing life and salvation to the human survivors and guiding their chosen clans from the flames of destruction. With them came their warrior Gods protecting the people in the Goddesses names and blessing the unborn with their powers, giving every thousandth child the gifts of a deity.

That had been two thousand years ago, or so the scroll-teachers, the historians who fed the children knowledge of Rhye's history verbally from memory, generation to generation, year after year had taught. That was the lesson and truth as Trowa knew it; how he was taught to believe.

Trowa was as blessed as he was cursed. He had the gift to save his clan from the beasts of their world. But he was denied the comforts of a normal man. He was an accursed born.

He would have no mate, he would have no child, he would have no one to share his fire, or his heart. To be born blessed by the Goddess was to be born to serve and never to be served. He had become one of her Warrior Gods.

He would lead his people through the plains, protect them with his skill, and guide them safely during the day. He would lay sentry at night, listening for the beasts that stole into the camp.

And he did it all in silence. No one spoke to him, it was forbidden to look upon him for fear his curse would touch another. It was forbidden to look upon the face of a God.

Even his own sister was denied his presence. When at eight his blessing first became apparent and he'd been given to the elderly "Beast-Tamer" and taught his duty to the clan.

The only voice he had was that of his mentor and teacher. Always speaking in hushed tones as not to be heard by the clan. To listen to the voice of a God was a sin, and would cause one to become tainted by his curse and perish. For a God was blessed, to another it was the curse of death. Or so it was taught, and thus believed.

Always sleeping apart from the camp. Always finding, and killing their own meals for meat and sustenance, never allowed to share in the clans hunt for fear of tainting their supply.

Water was left for them outside the camp in cups that were never used again once they had been sipped from by a God, no mere mortal would dare touch his or her lips to a chalice made holy by the touch of an Accursed Fire Born.

It was a staggeringly lonely existence, and the young man who stood in the pouring rain made even more solitary by the death of his mentor during his fifteenth summer.

Now at twenty summers, two turnings of the tithe, Trowa could barely remember the sound of his own voice as he lay night after night in solitude under the stars. Looking with longing across the border, where beyond the plains lay endless Savannah's of desert waste.

Wishing night after night he could cast off his duties and flee into the unknown in search of...

That was where his dream faltered. He didn't know what he was searching for, just something to ease the pain of his sorrow filled life.

But even other clans shunned the accursed ones. One in every thousand was born with the blessing and the curse--one child in every thousand was born to the duty of protecting their clans whilst forsaking themselves in celibacy and chastity. In the name of the Goddess who chose to bless them with a higher calling. Who granted them the robes of a God in her service, and in the service of her chosen clan children of Rhye.

Ashura the Lioness, Goddess of the plains had chosen Trowa as one such child.

Trowa despised Ashura as much as he revered her. Swore in her name as often as he prayed to his goddess for surcease to his torment.

Ashura was ever silent, only the rustle of wind through the grass ever answered Trowa's pleas for release.

Only his imagination and his nightmares remained.

Were they part of his blessing or signs of madness? Trowa knew not.

He only knew there was a storm on the horizon. Even the beasts felt it stirring in the earth.

But this was no natural storm created by the hand of a deity, this one, as in the great wars before that had rendered the land inhospitable and violent, was created by the hand of man.

And it was coming and coming soon.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Quatre gazed up at the stars, his eyes red rimmed and flowing with tears. "Why?" was the whisper spoken to the Goddess Shira, the White Goddess of the Eastern desert who painted the stars in the heavens nightly as her White Stallions pulled her chariot across the sky.

She who had blessed him, she who had cursed him was silent as ever as he asked her counsel.

His dreams foreshadowing a great upheaval of clans, and Rhye itself vanishing beneath a curtain of fire and bloodshed, the world torn asunder and shifted from its axis night after night in his dreams and he was on his knees begging his goddess to tell him why he was dreaming these visions of hate and horror.

Her answer never came. Only the knowledge that time was short, and the storm was coming soon.

The “life bringer” the “Accursed Fire Born” named Quatre turned back to his tent and feared his sleep as he lay down upon his worn pillows. His blessing and his curse to predict sand storms, and find the elixir of life known as water in the wasteland of sand the Maguanac clans called home.

He brought continued life to his people by leading them from oasis to oasis, or leading them to shelter from the whirlwinds and tempests that could strike without warning to a clan without a “life bringer” to guide them to safety.

He knew where to find the wandering humpbacks for their caravans, where to find the desert snakes who would strike at them from buried holes across the parched earth. He created the trails that were ever shifting across the dunes and the passage of time.

He knew by instinct, he knew without maps or routes, his heart led his wandering people as surely as a beacon of hope in a land forsaken and despoiled.

His heart told him his people appreciated him, it made the loneliness bearable, but only just.

His heart felt other emotions that he yearned to be directed towards him, but he was ever denied.

He knew what love felt like; he knew how it tasted on the flesh as a man gazed with lust at his lover. Quatre could feel it, but never know it beyond the brush against his blessed and cursed senses.

He curled up around his pillows and wept his loneliness dry once more as fitful sleep overtook him once more.

And fire rained down from the sky, and the trumpets heralded doom.

Beware the storm that gathers here his dreams called out once more.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

CHAPTER TWO:

As he watched the lights dance across the night sky, he marveled at the beauty of his Goddess, while beseeching her light to reach down and answer his prayers.

But as her gown of iridescent hues billowed with her movements across the sky, she either heard him not, or declined to answer. Whichever the reason he stood at the mouth of his cave, his toes frozen into the earth and ice. Refusing to admit he was too afraid to return to his bed to sleep.

Terrified of the dreams that would surely come again this night, as they had come every night since the summer sun had set and the winter night had claimed the land.

With a sigh of defeat and with midnight blue eyes casting one more longing glance to the skies, Heero pulled his skins and furs tighter around his small frame, and headed into his shelter from the bitter cold.

Adding fuel to his fire, he settled before the flames on his knees, setting his ivory carving of his goddess before him on the floor. Prostrating his body before her image and pleading with her silently to bestow upon him a way to end his torment.

To she who stands where all paths begin and end, to she, Lorena-Lands-End, Goddess of the frigid north he prayed. Dropping leaves and dried petals into a small pot of snow that he then placed on the fire to boil.

His prayers had been delivered to her upon the wind, but he was having trouble hearing her reply if she was indeed calling to him from beyond with answers to his woes.

Tonight he would drink of her powder, her blessed snow, and of the leaves of her summer flowers that lived and died in but a twenty-four hour cycle once every thirteen years. Together they would brew and give him the gift of sight beyond sight.

Tonight he would travel as close as he could to her majesty and shout and scream his pleas for guidance.

Perhaps tonight she would hear him at last and end his sorrow.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

There was a hush in the beasts tonight, stillness to the very breeze. Everything listening.

Waiting.

“This is no storm brewing from Ro's making my friends.” Duo said as he helped the small newborn bison calf to its feet. A horrible breech birth had almost killed it and it's mother. Duo's calming and healing hands aiding his clan's beasts to overcome with a loving touch.

Across the field stood his clan, giving him a wide berth as their God took care of their needs as always. He sighed and nuzzled the weary mother's thick coat with his cheek as he soothed her. “You're not afraid of me are you love? My curse, my blessing, my hell. You know I'm no different than the next man don't you?” Duo spoke to the only creature willing

and able to hear him. And even then, he spoke in soft, lilting tones, as if his voice belonged with the breeze upon which it floated.

He turned his gaze upward. "I hate you Ro. I never asked for this, I never wanted it. But I have done my duty to you and your people year after year, without complaint. I have never failed in my responsibilities. Yet you deign to punish me nightly with visions of death and refuse me answers in how I am to repent." Duo said, tears welling in his richly hued indigo eyes. His luxuriant long tresses the same earthy shade as the Bison he cared for.

A gregarious creature as a youth, a solemn and lonely young man of nineteen summers looked towards his Goddess. Ro, mover of mountains and forger of Rivers, pillar of strength and virtue that held up the very sky, and mother to the beasts who found succor from her earth. Ro the bane to his existence, Ro the giver of his life and blessings, Ro the ever-silent entity he served faithfully.

He hated her with every breath he took, and apologized for his hate filled thoughts with every breath expelled. Torn between his duty and his desires, his duty always remaining to the forefront, he always held his duty priority over his own needs and wants.

Duo was made of sterner stock; beat him you may in the end. But he would nary lie down and accept defeat without a fight. But how did you fight an enemy that only visited in dreams and left come dawn with only shadows remaining. Shadows that left the taste of vile terror hanging in his throat like bile.

Ro had no answer for him.

He was slowly drowning from the torture of his dreams. If only she'd answer him, tell him what he must do to make the horrors end. He pleaded one last time to the stars, and the wind brushed the hair from his face as his mother's hands once had done.

"Go East"

Duo's head whipped around towards the soft voice that rustled the wheat blowing lazily all around him.

No one was there, only the ringing of his ears and his rapid heartbeat remained.

He had his answer. His instincts called to him and spurred him onward, he stood as if in a trance and whistled through his teeth. A large giant of a bull walked over and Duo patted his head and scratched him around the horns long fingers getting lost in his beast's thick woolly coat of fur atop his head. "Well Saishi, let's go." Duo said to his beloved friend and companion and mounted his large Bison bull and urged him eastward.

Disappearing into the night, leaving everything he owned and his clan behind. Only his medicine bag on his hip, and the clothes on his back to shelter and protect him from the world unknown. He was being called, his Goddess was summoning him; he knew it deep down in his bones.

Her path he walked everyday, he had come to the crossroads.

Eastward.

Ever eastward he would travel until she bid him to stop

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Heero, you do not listen. Hear me now.” Came the velvet voice as Heero lay on the floor of his cave in the throes of his potion’s spell. Writhing in pain as it burned his core, and wailing in ecstasy as it made his blood and vigor for life boil, rainbow patterns of light dancing before dilated eyes, to seduce his senses and sharpen his subconscious mind.

He saw her visage in the transformation of light, her concerned face looking upon him, his Goddess, his beautiful spiritual leader. Dressed in her furs, her upturned dark eyes filled with stars from the heavens. Her hands clasped before her calmly as she stood before him in all her glory.

“Go South.” She commanded and vanished as quickly as she had come. Fading and dispersing into twinkling and shifting rays of firelight against crystallized ice formations along the walls of his home.

He could feel her warmth penetrate him, stroke his desire, feed his burning needs, yet her fire reached only her chosen ones. The landscape basked in just her glow, remaining an ever-constant tundra of white and ice.

He was being summoned, being called to a gathering of gods, warriors to be collected into an army. This he knew, he could feel in her urging. Spoken not in words, but in images that had visited him in dreams.

He now understood, and he would obey.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The mountain erupted in fire, skin flayed off flesh and melted bone. No matter where he turned bodies fell from heat and fire. Black smoke choked his lungs as he searched frantically the battlefield for... for him.

There, the golden angel stood, calling to him, reaching for him, grasping to pull him to safety. The angel with no wings, and blood spattered clothes. Hands blistered from wielding two arched blades of flashing iron with a fury without intent to kill, but to protect.

A noble creature, far nobler than the lions on the plains, grace personified, tender movements of limbs encased him and love for all oozing from the golden man to purify others left in his wake. Sheltering Trowa with arms that held him tight, blessing him with a final kiss before the fire consumed them both.

This was where Trowa would normally awake from his dreams that last image robbing him of breath as a strangled sob of loss and devastation was ripped from his throat.

Not tonight. Tonight he remained standing in the fire untouched and a face formed and solidified and a figure with feline grace stepped forth.

Trowa fell to his knees before her and prostrated his dream visage at her feet. “Ashura” he whispered as his Goddess appeared before him.

Again he was pulled into tender and loving arms as she cradled him like a babe to her breast. Rocking him as he sobbed into her chest.

“Ah, mine Trowa. I must show you these things so you understand. I know how it hurts.” She soothed as a mother to a small child.

“Wait for him, then go north.” She said cryptically before she faded leaving Trowa to sleep the night away in blissful peace. Only the face of the golden angel left in his dreams to soothe his slumber.

“Wait for him, then go north.” Trowa muttered in acceptance and understanding in his sleep as he rolled over and settled more deeply into his sleeping mat, a rare smile subtly tugging at lips unaccustomed to moving at all.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Parched with thirst Quatre held his hand up to shade his eyes. Leading his pristine white mare across the dunes rather than riding to conserve her strength in the heat of the full sun. Zozma ever his companion since she was a foal nudged him with her nose to push him forward. Heading west into the setting sun. “I know girl. We’re going. I’m as impatient as you are to find water love.” He’d said lovingly, patting her nose and continuing his journey.

He’d named her for a star in the Leo constellation. It had been the first thing he’d spied in the sky the night she was born and almost killed because of the golden star pattern on her forelock, a bad omen to some of his clan’s more superstitious people, a mark that meant to them a brand of her being born un-pure and tainted. Quatre however knew it was a sign of her strength, and had taken the colt as his own and raised her with his own two hands.

Now seven summers together, horse and rider knew each other well. At times Quatre would swear Zozma knew what he was thinking just by the knowing looks she’d give to him.

He’d had another dream and Zozma had been there waiting for him whereupon she had shifted into the form of his White Goddess Shira. She had bid him to head west, and he had left immediately upon waking, walking out of his tent to find Zozma there, holding her bit in her teeth. Demanding he bring her with him, he had only smiled and saddled her and now for three days the pair of them had been heading continually westward.

Wandering aimlessly, dehydrating in the sun, and waiting for the next sign from the goddess.

Following her call blind with faith that she would guide him safely through the desert to the West.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Trowa saw a flash of white in the distance, glinting in the rising sun. Streaking through the tall grass, running recklessly and blind with panic. He could taste the fear, smell it in the air, running from predators in the grass.

Trowa ran toward the white strange zebra-like creature. Sending out his senses to turn the lions away from their quarry. Racing headlong and out of breath he intercepted the terrified creature, trying to soothe it as its sides heaved from exertion and stress.

The mare's mouth was foaming as she nearly collapsed where she stood, only then did Trowa see the slumped form topple from her back. He moved to catch the falling figure, and Trowa's own breath caught in his throat as the angel from his dreams fell into his arms. Sun burnt, lips cracked and dry and eyes too weary to focus.

"Go West." The tiny voice said, cracking and dry like brittle blades of grass.

"Nay, from here we go north." Trowa whispered urging the mare slowly forward as he carried the limp form back to his tent.

"But not until you rest God of the East." Trowa added laying the beautiful young man on his sleeping mat and running out to find water for both Mare and Rider urgently.

Both were almost depleted of reserves and were waning quickly.

His clan be damned if they refused aide to another Accursed Born. Taint or not, Trowa would not see these two suffer out of imbecilic fear.

He marched right into the heart of his clan, and toward the water hole they were camped around.

He pointed to several men who stood in shock that their Beast Tamer suddenly appeared without warning among them.

Trowa pointed to the water. "Bring all that you can carry to my tent. Now." Trowa ordered, turning back and walking away.

The men instantly did as told, even in shock that their God had made a demand, they dare not refuse.

Soon, several buckets were outside Trowa's tent. Zozma was given a trough and after drinking heavily had settled in the grass to sleep.

Inside his tent, Trowa carefully laid a cup to the young stranger's lips. "Here, drink." Trowa whispered as a groggy and befuddled Quatre began to drink with abandon. "Whoa, slowly. There's plenty." Trowa said easing his fellow back to the ground.

"Thank you." Quatre said looking up and wincing as his lips stung when he tried to smile at the stranger. He could tell by looking, he was in the southern Bartonese Lands, and he was in the presence of one they called "Beast Tamer", which meant it was safe to touch and talk, they were the same.

This beast tamer was a sight for sore, lonely eyes. It was rare to find other Accursed Born to talk to. Not every Clan had one, and most times clans avoided each other, in all his eighteen summers, Quatre had only ever met two others like him. His mentor, and one he'd met in passing at thirteen summers of age during a clans gathering.

And that one Quatre preferred not to remember. He'd been sore for days after. So he pushed the memory away.

Even if he'd forgiven the other man long ago. He understood the needs of a lonely man, he understood with frightening clarity.

Especially now as he gazed up into green eyes that simply and utterly took his breath away. A face that was chiseled and lean and just as lonely and in need.

“You’re welcome. I am Trowa. I have dreamed of you.” He said and Quatre closed his eyes and nodded.

“I am Quatre. And I know you too.” He said opening his eyes to see a smile grace Trowa’s beautiful lips.

“We go north from here. I have been told.” Trowa said and Quatre nodded.

“As I was bid to go west. This is my calling, you must be my next sign. Let us go then.” Quatre said moving to sit up. Trowa pushed him back down.

“Nay, not until you rest. I am making some salve for your burns as well. You are in no fit state to travel.” Trowa said and Quatre kept silent.

Trowa was right, he felt positively horrible. Another day and sunstroke would have taken him. He would do as told.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

CHAPTER THREE:

Torches burned all along the corridor in sconces set every thirteen paces, along the onyx-encrusted walls of the sanctuary, as the chosen "Truth Bearers" walked side by side toward the temple's altar to pray for guidance.

Lying as sentry to the gates of the temple lay centuries old, jewel encased, golden effigies of the Goddess familiars. Fire serpents, limbless dragons that had arisen from the flames of the "Great War" to purge the evildoers and end the catastrophe. Ushering those who needed cleansing into the wasteland created by their own hands to suffer and learn from their mistakes and to rebuild.

Whilst collecting the greatest of sinners together and belching scorching flames upon those responsible for the destruction, then from there these fire born creatures returned, settling down in the crater where the fires still burned at the battle's original epicenter, becoming one with the flames that burned a millennia before settling and dying out, becoming a blackened blight to a once green and lush landscape.

A ruined land, bleak and barren, a dead reminder to all those who ventured near the cost of sin was this atrocity, a constant warning not to repeat mistakes.

From this pit of despair a call had been sent out as the flames perished, a summons from J'mi, The Goddess of Iniquity. From the melted and charred rubble those she had called to her breast formed her clan and built her a temple.

These few men and women she had called to her service were the most pious and faithful left of the surviving humans. To each one did she bestow the gifts of seeing and knowledge. To each one she gave the gift of Truth. Truth of Rhye's History and the facts and lessons that needed remembering.

To each one she did bid stand sentinel to the dark history of Rhye and guard the gates of hell from passage from both the evil behind it's walls and the innocents who would tread within it's decay without knowing to their ultimate demise.

Over the years, through hardship and strife her clan had dwindled. Only two had remained, a young man of twenty summers and a woman of the some two turnings less. Newly mated to one another, J'mi called them to her from their marriage bed.

A sleep she laid upon her most beloved, because the storm was coming but to a mortal it was still beyond their lifespan. These two were the strongest, these last two would be needed, so J'mi laid them to rest upon her alter and bid them slumber until the time of the calling of Gods.

For a thousand years did they sleep a deathlike slumber, frozen in time, waiting upon the dawning of the storm.

The dawning was upon them, and now Wufei and his mate Meiran headed down dead corridors toward J'mi's temple to receive once more her edict and counsel.

Her Warriors had arisen and would carry her word, and stand guard against the evils of a corrupt world.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Heero looked out across the vast prairie before him, his eyes wide with wonder at its majesty. For seven days had he traveled by foot down from the frozen north and from the vast mountains of his home. "There's so much sky." He breathed looking around the unbroken landscape. Squinting at the horizon where the sky actually touched the land.

He was standing in rapture at the view when he saw movement to his right. There coming from the west was a massive brown beast, woolly and four legged, it walked a slow pace, the sun setting slowly behind it, giving it an almost ethereal glow.

Heero had no name for the creature, yet stood unafraid, he had seen before this beast, in his dreams, he stood stock still and awaited it's approach. Praying fervently this was in fact the same strange quadruped of his nightmares.

Because if it was.... If it was... HE would be with it.

It was so hard to tell if the beast had a rider with the sun blurring the image as it shone upon them from behind.

Heero had to blink the spots out of his eyes repeatedly to try and focus. But soon it was too much and he had to look away from the sun and rub his eyes.

When he opened them again he nearly jumped out of his skin, not two inches from his face stood a grinning god.

"I thought that was you. Just as I dreamed you to be, I'm sorry if I scared you." The longhaired stranger said and Heero couldn't help but smile.

"Scared? Nay. Startled by your silent approach aye. And you are much better in person than in my dreams. I cannot do this in my dreams." Heero said pulling the other accursed born into his arms to hold.

Only a startled noise of shock escaped the tanned man as he was pulled into a grateful embrace.

Oh the glory of touch, the thrill of a voice, the smell of musk and leather, all of it denied so long. Never in his nineteen summers had Heero ever had another to touch or to touch him in return. At least not during a time he could remember. As the stranger's arms returned the embrace, and a head nestled against a shoulder, Heero knew paradise.

"I'm Duo by the way. Nice to meet you too." The stranger chuckled into Heero's neck.

Heero smiled and stood back to look upon the face of Duo once more. "My name is Heero, I'm sorry. I... I just..."

"No need to apologize. Did you hear me complaining?" Duo interrupted taking Heero's hand and leading him toward Saishi who grazed a few feet away.

"I've been hoping you'd be real. It's not everyday we get to be near someone. Touch me all you want Heero. Cause it's going to be awfully hard for me to keep my hands off you." Duo said grinning and scrunching up his nose in jest as he pushed Heero into the grass.

"Now sit, you're limping." Duo said moving to pull off Heero's oilskin boots. And Fishing in his hip pouch for ointment.

"This is going to be cold. But, it'll help the pain. You've got blisters. No more walking for a while." Duo said smearing the cream on the soles of Heero's feet.

A pebble whizzed by Duo's ear. "It's more than cold! It stings!" Heero said hissing through his teeth. Duo just smiled.

"Well, sit down and rest once in a while and you won't get blisters then." Duo said wrapping Heero's feet in soft gauze. "There. Now, I say just camp here for the night and we can continue in the morning." Duo said moving to start a fire. Heero began to get up to help, Duo spun around and pointed to the ground.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! No you don't. Just sit still on that spot Heero. I'm a big boy, I can piss standing up and I can make a fire all by myself too. Lie down, stay off your feet." Duo ordered and Heero glared but did as told.

Duo may have been just about the most beautiful creature in the world to his lonely eyes, but he wasn't sure if he could handle such a gregarious creature.

One look into those caring eyes however and Heero melted. He'd survive; he doubted if he could live another day without looking into those beautiful eyes.

"Then let me share my meal with you at least." Heero said tossing his back satchel at Duo. "Jack-Jumper". Heero said and Duo picked up the bag.

"You caught a Jack-Jumper? How in the world did you manage that?" Duo asked pulling out the long eared, large footed rodent from the confines of the sack, and grabbing his skinning knife from his belt sat down to clean dinner and set it to cook.

"Skill." Heero said smugly, leaning back on his elbows. Duo snorted.

"Bison-dung! Luck is more like it." Duo said cocking an eyebrow. Heero laughed.

"Goddess blessed dinner this eve... He hopped right into me. Thankfully I have quick reflexes and hands." Heero chuckled and Duo smirked.

"Quick hands huh? Hummmmmm." Duo said smirking and wagging his eyebrows.

Heero had never blushed in his life, he was positive he was the shade of polar bear blood against snow from the heat in his cheeks and the sudden heat in other areas as well.

He lifted his eyes to the heavens and said a silent prayer of thanksgiving to Lorena before turning his eyes back to the other object of divine beauty within his vision.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Quatre awoke to an awful stench. Trowa was hovering above him with a bowl in his hands. "Quatre wake up please. The salve is ready." Trowa said going to his knees and setting the bowl filled with a thick paste beside him on the floor.

"Oh god it smells AWFUL." Quatre moaned and Trowa smiled in apology.

"I know, I'm sorry. But it works." Trowa said digging his fingers into the thick milky yellow paste. Reaching over to apply it to burned cheeks, nose and lips.

A hand appeared in front of his target. Quatre covering nose and mouth from the foul concoction and Trowa frowned. "Quatre, you need this."

"It stinks, I'LL stink." Quatre said and Trowa chuckled.

"You stink already. So you'll stink a little more for tonight. Move your hand." Trowa said and Quatre shook his head.

"I can do it." Quatre said and moving to take the bowl and Trowa shook his head and pushed Quatre back into the mat.

"I know you can. Please let me? I want to." Trowa said giving a shy smile. Quatre lowered his hand and Trowa was sure the sunburn had suddenly darkened.

"As you wish." Quatre said lowering his eyes as Trowa's fingers gently brushed his face with cool salve. It might have smelled pungent, but it was soothing, but not nearly as soothing as the hands caring for him.

Quatre closed his eyes as fingers traced his chapped and cracked lips. "You're so beautiful." Came the whisper and Quatre flushed once more.

"Thank you. So are you." Quatre said looking up into eyes the color of palm fronds, rich and sparkling, and darkening with desire and want.

"Thank you. Now hush, your lips need much care. I don't want you to damage them more by splitting them open again. We can talk later, once the cream begins to work." Trowa said smiling as he smeared the waxy mixture over abused skin.

"Zozma is she all right?" Quatre asked suddenly and Trowa quirked an eyebrow.

"Zozma? Your white beast?" Trowa asked and Quatre nodded. "Aye, she is fine. I rubbed her down, watered her and she is resting just outside. Now cease talking." Trowa said moving to smear more globs of sticky paste onto Quatre's nose.

Quatre at peace now that he knew his mare was sound and safe; did as told and laid back allowing Trowa to pamper him. He had to admit, it was wonderful to be touched.

So long so very long without words, without touch, without contact, five summers of solitude. And even then the last touches he had felt had not been pleasant.

Too rough, too demanding. Not like this, nothing like the way Trowa touched him. Feather light as if he'd shatter like glass if touched too hard. His caresses acting like a balm, making him drowsy with comfort.

Trowa smiled as he watched Quatre struggle to remain awake. He knew precisely that Quatre was trying to stay awake in order to savor the ministrations. "Sleep Quatre. You can rest assured I will touch you again. Just sleep for now, I am as happy to see you and feel you too." Trowa said leaning over to press a gentle kiss to Quatre's brow.

"Sleep." Trowa said once more using his subtle gifts of persuasion to add more weight to his words.

Quatre only sighed and slipped away into sleep. Muttering something about fair and it being naught.

Trowa chuckled and set aside the bowl, covering it to minimize the smell, before moving to his mat to wrap around Quatre on the small cushion. Quatre was quite a bit smaller than himself, not small, just smaller than Trowa who was a rather tall man to begin with; Quatre was of an average man's height. But in comparison to Trowa's frame, Quatre fit wonderfully alongside him comfortably. Like he had belonged there all along.

Trowa thanked Ashura for the paradise he held in his arms before he too settled into the mat to sleep beside his fellow blessed born beside him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

"You have called, we have come." Wufei said setting his torch into the empty pyre before him.

A wall of flame rose to the ceiling and a fiery figure of a woman with golden flaming Tresses waving around her stepped from the blaze.

"Wufei... Meiran." J'mi addressed them, nodding to each in turn. "I have indeed summoned you here. It is time. You must Gather the Gods. My sisters have started them on the journey to the center. Meet you them there, warn them that the time of undoing is near. Man once more dares to know the will of the makers. Our chosen ones are suffering, and the clans are torn asunder. Fear rules men's hearts. Knowledge is lost. Ignorance has bred contempt, and contempt has bred hate, and hate will breed war.

They come from across the sea to Rhye; they bring the hell fire with them. Prepare our warriors to face the coming storm. Undo their teachings, undo their shame, undo their man made curse, and make them one." J'mi said before the flames grew bright then dimmed to nothingness.

"I hear and obey." Wufei said kneeling.

"I hear and obey." Meiran echoed before turning to look at her mate.

"We saw the foreshadowing of the Blessed born woes in our own time. How bad has it become do you wonder?" She asked and Wufei sighed.

"If the Goddess Sisters interfere, it must be worse than either you and I can comprehend my love." He said reaching up to touch her cheek affectionately. "I have missed you."

"And I you." She said melting into his touch and into his arms, together again at last.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

CHAPTER FOUR:

Trowa awoke when a noise he was unaccustomed to hearing in his tent alerted his senses. A soft whimpering, pathetic sounding whine, and coming from... from... Quatre.

The last of his fuddled senses cleared instantly when he remembered he was not alone as usual in his tent. Trowa scooted closer and pulled the sleeping body into his arms. "Shhhhh, It's all right Quatre." Trowa whispered smoothing Quatre's sweat dampened bangs from his brow.

"No, no please don't. I don't like this." Quatre mumbled in his sleep and Trowa's brow drew together in concern.

"What don't you like Quatre?" He asked the sleeping form.

"You're hurting me, please stop!" Quatre cried out bolting awake and sitting up with a start. Almost hyperventilating with panic. Trowa though startled, quickly recovered and moved to wrap comforting arms around the nightmare stricken young man sharing his bed.

"Who was hurting you?" Trowa asked as Quatre turned into the embrace still trembling.

"It's nothing. I'm sorry if I disturbed your sleep." Quatre said sniffing.

"It's not nothing, look at you. You're sick with fear. Tell me please, I have had the nightmares too. It might help to talk." Trowa urged leaning back into his pillows and pulling Quatre back to rest against him comfortably.

"This was a different nightmare. Not of something that may be, but of something that was. It's a past experience that's all. It's nothing Trowa, don't fret, I'll be okay." Quatre said lying to spare Trowa the truth, to spare himself from having to relive it again as well.

"I see. You said enough where I can guess. I am not the first Accursed one you've met am I?" Trowa asked and the stiffening of Quatre's shoulders and muscles confirmed Trowa's suspicions.

Quatre shook his head no, afraid if he spoke at this point the tears would start. Trowa held him tighter.

"How old were you Quatre?" Trowa asked stroking Quatre's back lightly in soothing patterns.

"Thirteen turnings."

"Barbarian. Even Gods have flaws. I will never touch you against your will Quatre. I promise. If that is the concern that spawned your dreams tonight." Trowa reassured, as he felt slender arms wrap around his waist.

"No, that was never a concern. I told you not to worry Trowa. Yes, the memory stings, but I have had five turnings to rationalize my fears. I was too young then to understand what he needed. I do now. I can understand loneliness and need, had I known then what I do now it would not have been so traumatizing. It's not so much what he did that disturbs my dreams Trowa. It's a far more simple reason, magnified beyond all proportion by my subconscious.

Look at me, even at eighteen turnings I am not what you would call a large man, I was much smaller then. It's the pain I remember." Quatre said and Trowa shuddered.

"It's still wrong. In my clan you must be fifteen turnings to consent to contact. If a man, or a woman for that matter dare touch another before their age of consent, it is punishable by death. " Trowa said obviously more affected by Quatre's past than Quatre was.

"As in mine. But I still cannot blame him. He had been alone for more turnings than I had been alive. His need outweighed his better judgment. I am not bitter about it. I only have irrational dreams that plague me occasionally. Please don't be angry. I am sorry my nightmares disturb you so." Quatre said sitting up to look at Trowa.

"And now you apologize for something beyond your control. You truly are as I dreamed you to be. Please do not say you're sorry. I am angry with man who should have known better. Not at you." Trowa said sitting up and placing his hands on either side of Quatre's face. Laying his forehead against Quatre's smiling. "And I find I cannot stay angry with you looking at me like this. What is your gift Quatre? What power do you have to make me feel so at peace inside?" He asked and Quatre smiled back softly.

"I don't know. But it has nothing to do with my gifts." Quatre said reaching up to wrap his arms around Trowa's neck. "Perhaps, you and I have just dreamed of one another enough to feel this strange peace. I feel it too. As if I have always known you. I am not going to Question Shira's wisdom in this, for showing your heart to me in dreams. I thank her for leading me to you." Quatre said crawling into Trowa's arms again.

Trowa sighed and held tight. "As I thank Ashura for showing me you. I just pray I do not have to let go. I don't think I'll be able to." Trowa said as they settled back into the sleeping mat.

"I never let you go in my dreams." Quatre said sadly.

"No, you never did. You held on to the very last. Oh Goddess!" Trowa declared as he burst into tears clinging to Quatre.

"I will not let you die like that, I will not let it happen!" Trowa wept wrapping around Quatre as his nightmare of them dying together in flame washed over his mind again and again.

The pain in his chest was the most painful thing Trowa had ever had to endure. He already felt the loss keenly and he'd only known Quatre but a few hours.

"Don't Trowa. Don't live in the possibilities. Live in the moment. We have warning, knowledge is power, and together we can change the course of the path before us. I am here, now, and I am very much alive and breathing. Do not mourn my loss while I still breathe." Quatre said rolling to press Trowa to the mat, his weight atop him.

"As I will not mourn you while I have you near." He added pressing his lips gently against Trowa's only to flinch.

It was enough to break the spell and Trowa had to chuckle despite the moment.

"Forget your lips were sunburned?"

"Yes. Ow, Damn it." Quatre said extricating himself off Trowa to fish for the jar of salve.

Trowa reached it first and dug a finger into the paste to smear on Quatre's lips. "And if you think to kiss me again with this on your lips, you have another thing coming." Trowa said smiling and Quatre chuckled while Trowa applied the ointment.

"I don't blame you. This is foul stuff indeed. But you are right, it does work, no matter the stench." Quatre said in an altered voice as he pinched his nose shut.

Trowa laughed as he replaced the lid and set the jar aside. "Just one day and you should be right as rain. Then I'll let you wash it off, but until then, get used to the smell. Believe me, I want it gone as much as you do." Trowa said as they curled up on the mat together. "I'll have them bring more water and you can have a bath tomorrow night."

"Bath? What's a Bath?"

Trowa rolled to face Quatre with a look of shock on his face. "A Bath, a tub of water to clean yourself in."

"You waste that much water?" Quatre asked in shock.

"It is not scarce. A bath is not a waste."

"Unbelievable, where I'm from water is very precious. A damp cloth is considered a luxury. You immerse yourself in it?" Quatre asked still in disbelief.

"Yes, we do. Regularly. I think you're going to enjoy it." Trowa said a smirk on his face.

Quatre looked half crazed with desire. "Oh, I think you are right. In fact I know you are. I have never in my life dreamed something like this was commonplace. I'm about to explode from anticipation now." Quatre said rolling onto his back.

"And now I am no longer sleepy. Trowa you are an evil man to tempt me so in the middle of the night." Quatre said just turning his head to look at Trowa lying beside him with a smile.

"I never claimed to be a good man. You just assumed." Trowa said smiling back and Quatre laughed.

"That is true. Just how evil are you?" Quatre asked with a smirk on his face.

"How evil do you want me to be?" Trowa retorted with an equally suggestive smile.

"I think you're perfect the way you are. Even if sleep is hopeless for me tonight thanks to you. Goodnight Trowa." Quatre said rolling over to his side trying in vain to find his rest for the remainder of the night.

Trowa smiled and spooned up behind Quatre. "Goodnight." He said as Quatre settled into his arms.

It took a while, but eventually both men did find sleep again before dawn.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Heero woke up well before dawn, and lost count of the minutes as he just stared at the sleeping form beside him on the ground. Duo slept so quietly, like a flower that curled up in upon its center, waiting for the sun to kiss its petals before opening to face the day. That was the illusion at least until Duo spoke.

“Heero, quit staring at me and go to sleep. You’re giving me the shivers with that stare of yours. You’ve got gorgeous eyes, but they still creep me out. Blink or something.” Duo said cracking open an eye to grin up at the man propped up on an elbow beside him.

“Sorry. I’m just... I can’t help it. I have never been able to just look at anyone before freely like this. I am sorry for making you feel uncomfortable.” Heero began to apologize but Duo only smiled and patted the ground beside him.

“Forget about it Heero. I’m not upset or uncomfortable. I’m just not used to anyone looking at me at all. Let alone the way you look at me. But you already know what it’s like to be a so-called God. I don’t need to elaborate, and neither do you. I understand exactly what it’s like for you. It was the same for me too.” Duo said as Heero lay back down beside him.

Nose to nose Duo grinned. “Look at me all you want to Heero. It is nice to be looked at even if it is strange.” He added and Heero smiled.

“You’re beautiful.” Heero said reaching up to rub at the markings on Duo’s cheeks. “But why do you cover it with this paint?” He asked rubbing the substance between his fingers examining the texture of the almost oily substance.

Duo shrugged. “It is my mark. My mentor wore it, his mentor wore it, and so on. It is how people know I am tainted. Don’t you wear it?”

“No. But my clan is small and there are no others near. They know me well enough without me having to proclaim my curse. And you shouldn’t either, nothing so beautiful should be covered up with this... this black mess.” Heero said sitting up and reaching for his back satchel. He removed a strip of cloth and a small pot.

“What’s that?” Duo asked and Heero turned to face him.

“You’ll see. Close your eyes... please?” Heero asked and Duo only shrugged and shut his eyes.

He felt tentative hands begin to spread a sweet smelling substance on his cheeks only to be followed by the cloth. Duo sighed and felt a tingling thrill rise in his core, leaving chill bumps on his skin as he reveled in the semi-intimate contact. “Ummm, what are you doing?” He finally asked when he was sure his voice wouldn’t crack with the question.

“I want to see you as the Goddess made you.” Heero said giving a final swipe of the cloth. “There, open your eyes.” Heero said and the smile on his face was breathtaking when Duo opened his eyes.

“Even more beautiful than I thought you would be. Such a face belongs unmasked.” Heero said and Duo smiled.

Duo just grinned and reached into his hip pouch beside him, taking out a small pot of black paint. He pressed it into Heero's hand. "Then I won't need this again if you prefer to look at me like this." He said and Heero flung the jar into the field.

"I very much prefer you like this." Heero said moving in much closer, hovering over the prone body on the ground.

"Oh Goddess Heero, you're a torture on the senses." Duo groaned as Heero moved to straddle him.

"I was just thinking the same thing about you. If I don't touch you, this instant I may go mad." Heero said one hand planted on either side of Duo's head.

"If you don't touch me after all you've done to me tonight I may have to kill you. Touch me!" Duo said and Heero growled as he crushed Duo to the ground, their lips grinding together in what could only be described as feral passion and lust.

Too long denied, too close to ignore, too urgent the need as hands began stripping each other of clothes as they groped and grabbed and rolled around in the grass in wild abandon.

Each man barely finding the time to send a prayer of thanks to their Goddess for granting them a moment of paradise, and praying it would last forever.

Awkward, inexperienced, and unsure, with only having knowledge from seeing his clans kin mate in acts of love to draw from, Heero was not quite sure how to go about making love to another. He only knew he wanted something, but not sure what it was he wanted.

A vague need, and boiling emotions arose in their centers and in their groins as they kissed and ground naked flesh against one another, moaning as hands touched fire, and hips found that intimate contact repeatedly.

Duo had only ever had one sexual experience in his life, and he had been only fourteen. But even then his mentor had ceased abruptly after Duo had cried out in pain and had run from the tent without ever looking back and never returning.

His body Duo found the next day, he had committed suicide in penance for forcing Duo into his bed, even if Duo had wanted it just as much. He was just discovering his own mortal needs and sexuality. One brief moment of sensory bliss to be touched, one stab of pain and his mentor had fled the tent. Duo had felt devastated and guilty, and then angry.

Unfulfilled, and robbed of the only person in his world he could talk to, touch, share his joy and sadness with, his death had sent Duo's world spiraling into a pit of despair and loneliness. He had forgotten, or rather had more accurately refused to acknowledge just how lonely he had been until Heero.

Now all those old feelings and joys of just being in another person's company came rushing back, and then some. Duo had never felt this fire in his soul before, this unrelenting need and thirst. This lust was blinding and it took all his will power to push Heero away.

Heero looked hurt until he realized what Duo was doing as he got to his hands and knees before Heero, picking up his medicine bag and pulling out a small jar and handing it to Heero.

“Coat yourself with it or you will hurt me. This much I know.” Was all that Duo said before positioning himself before Heero.

With shaking fingers that almost dropped the pot Heero removed the lid and did as instructed.

There was some pain, but not like he had remembered, but then Duo’s mentor had been far bigger than Duo in his youth and even the cream had not assuaged the intrusion.

Now however, being a man of similar size to the man with him, it was mere discomfort for a moment. Then the heat returned and their tears of joy mixed with their cries of bliss as they came together under the stars.

Marveling and worshipping each other’s bodies under the watchful gaze of the heavens and their Goddesses who had brought them together and had given them the greatest of gifts:

Companionship and newly found, reawakened emotions that could only be described to the forsaken as love was their blessing from the heavens, they would cherish this gift given them, and each other, for however long it lasted.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

CHAPTER FIVE:

A tall young man stood before the council, his shoulders squared and proud, his almost colorless, pale blue eyes never flinching under the scrutinizing stares he was being given by his captors. Let them try and break him, let them dare desecrate a God under the service of Lorena-Lands-End. Let them try, he was not afraid, he had faith in his Goddess and knew her vengeance should they hurt one of her servants would be swift in coming.

He was here for a reason, nothing ever happened without a reason. Lorena wanted him here, wanted him to suffer, wanted him to stand before these strange foreign men with honor and pride. He had been born to follow her path, and serve her, and he would serve her faithfully until the very end.

“This is the Shaman you captured from the North of Rhye?” A regal man with white hair, dressed in clothes so fine in composition and stitching Zechs had to fight the urge not to marvel at the workmanship. So used to heavy hides and warm garments, the fabric, a vibrant red, with intricate and decorative stitching, trimmed with gold ribbons, never before had he seen anything so opulent. This man looked far more resplendent than even the clan leader did in his best furs.

“He is. For some odd reason, the people of Rhye force their shaman’s into a reclusive existence. It was far too easy to obtain him from his cave, and no one will notice his absence for quite some time yet. It is forbidden for them to even look upon him as if he were some sort of God.” Another man dressed similarly said grinning as he reclined in a beautiful chair. Also draped in rich fabrics in brilliant hues.

Not a hint of admiration could be seen in the steely ice gaze of the Northern God.

“How bizarre. How backward a people if the initial reports are accurate.” Another said scanning several parchments spread out before him, along with various maps.

“They have never recovered from the great wars. They are still a broken land, rife with superstition and prejudice. Simply put the natives of Rhye have all become classless barbarians. They have no records left from before the Wars that I have been able to uncover in my wanderings of the land. It seems they have purposely buried any knowledge of technology whatsoever and have reverted back to an almost Neanderthal existence.” Yet one more said, speaking of Zechs who stood before them as little better than an ape.

“Funny, he certainly looks nothing like a Neanderthal to me Gentlemen. I find this discussion in his presence extremely distasteful. All men I have ever known possess feelings. Did you bring him here to belittle him or ask him questions?” Another said and Zechs turned to look at him.

Auburn hair, cut short with deep blue eyes. Eyes that were silently apologizing while the rest of the face remained looking passive and just a touch bored. Aloof and regal in bearing, dressed in a sapphire blue tunic, simple in design, and not nearly as garish in appliqué and trimmings as the garments the others were dressed in. It’s simplicity in and of itself breathtaking, with tall black boots that molded themselves onto strong shapely legs. He was quite a handsome young man around Zechs’ own age, perhaps just a little older. It was difficult to tell.

"Prince Treize, while we respect your father's wish that you be present in this council. I trust you remember why we are here." The one in red spoke again.

"I know Precisely why we are here Duke Demail. You, my Father, and the rest of you plan on raping a land of resources. I am here to make sure you do it without killing everyone to get what you want. Unlike you, I do have a certain amount of respect for life." Treize said narrowing his eyes at Demail.

"Leave it to a Shaman to pity another." Demail snorted and Zechs turned eyes back to the one the others called Prince Treize.

"I'm sorry you think that. When it is in fact one HUMAN caring about another human. It is a simple concept. It is a shame you cannot find meaning in it." Treize said turning to Zechs.

"You, what is your name?" Treize asked and Zechs stood there, without speaking.

"See stupid ignorant fools." Demail said and Treize smiled.

"Nay, I call it one stubborn man standing in front of me. Please, tell me your name. Or would you rather I make one up for you? I can be creative, but you may not like it." Treize said with a smile and Zech had to smile in return. He found it too hard to resist the one person in the room he felt any humanity toward at the moment.

"No I probably wouldn't. You may call me Zechs." The deep baritone rumbled and for a second he thought he saw Treize shiver.

"Zechs, interesting. Pray tell me is it true you are not allowed contact with others of your clan?" Treize asked picking up his goblet and bringing it slowly to his lips.

Zechs fought the groan that wanted to emerge from his throat. "I am in Service to the Goddess. I am in service to my people. My needs are secondary to my calling." Zechs repeated the law ingrained into his subconscious since his youth.

"Pity." Treize said sipping from his cup, his eyes focused solely into Zechs over the rim.

"To you perhaps. But I am fulfilled. I am rewarded with the knowledge that where I guide my clan they prosper." Zechs said and Treize set his mug down.

"But do you my friend? From what I hear you share not in the wealth of the clan. You must find your own food, cook your own meals, mend and make your own clothes, you must be silent, and giving, and are forced to live alone and are denied the basic necessities of human existence. You are nothing more than the slave of the clan. When you could be far greater." Treize said and Zechs sighed.

"You just do not understand. Yes, I am a man like any other. There are times when I do feel empty and desperate. But then I think of all the good I do, and whether I am rewarded in this lifetime or in the next or the next after that or never at all. It matters not, because in the end my greatest reward is peace in my soul knowing that I lived a good life in service to my Goddess. The good I do affects all around me and one should never do good only to be rewarded. That is my meaning, my purpose and what I was born and live to do. I pity you for not seeing the simple truth." Zechs said in return and Treize smiled.

“See, they are insane! They have bred this man to be a slave. To believe the drivel of goodness he spouts. The fact of life shaman is that no man does anything without knowing he will prosper by it in the end. I’ve heard enough. Take this barbarian out of the council chamber. He smells foul.” Demail said and Treize stood.

“Come with me Zechs if you please.” Treize said gesturing to the door.

“Prince Treize, the meeting has not adjourned.” Demail said a Treize snorted.

“I have heard more than enough. And before I let you lock this man away like some beast, I’d like to see him at least well fed and bathed.” Treize said without turning to face Demail.

“Your father gives you too much leash.” Demail said annoyed and Treize shrugged.

“He at least trusts me, which is more than I can say for you Duke Demail. Good day gentlemen.” Treize said gracefully taking Zech’s elbow.

“Please, come with me Zechs. I’d like to hear more how the people of Rhye live today. I am intrigued, please humor me.” Treize said leading Zechs out of the room and shutting the door.

“I have told you all I will. You may think me a barbarian, but I do have pride. I will not be condescended to, nor will I give you or your people an edge to conquering my homeland for selfish purposes.” Zechs said ripping his arm out of Treize hand.

“Precisely what I was hoping to hear. I am not after your homeland Zechs. I do not wish to see come to pass what has haunted my dream-walking every night.” Treize said in hushed tones and Zechs’ eyes grew wide briefly.

“The nightmares... you have seen them?” Zechs asked and Treize nodded.

“I have, and if Demail and my Father are not stopped the Great Wars will repeat themselves and all of us will perish in fire. Please talk to me Zechs, help me.” Treize asked in hardly more than a whisper, his eyes begging and pleading for hope.

Zechs nodded. “I will do what I can.”

“That’s all I ask for.” Treize said once more taking Zechs arm to lead him away from the council chambers and to a more secluded and private location for them to talk at length.

Treize led him down long corridors and past windows and pillars where roses climbed and lent the air an intoxicating fragrance, Zechs pausing several times to examine the blooms more closely, and to inhale rich scents.

“You seem as if you have never seen a rose.” Treize said and Zechs turned to face him with a rueful smile on his lips.

“I haven’t. Is that what these are called?” Zechs asked and Treize nodded plucking a large red bloom from the trellis handing it to Zechs.

CHAPTER SIX:

Heero was jolted awake when his rather over sensitive and ticklish foot was touched. His irritation was further compounded when instead of an apology he was greeted with laughter.

“Oh, someone is ticklish!” Duo chuckled as he continued to examine Heero’s foot.

“Stop it! Yes, I am. Let go.” Heero squirmed and Duo just gripped his ankle harder.

“Too bad. I’m checking your blisters so suffer a minute.” Duo said his facial expression apparently satisfied with his handiwork from the previous night. “Be glad you’re ticklish this morning and not wincing as you were last night.” Duo added smiling before setting Heero’s foot back down.

“True. Just warn me next time if you are going to wake me up out of a sound sleep like this.” Heero said flopping back down onto his back while Duo carefully checked under the gauze wrapping Heero’s other foot.

“But you look so adorable annoyed.” Duo teased as he finished his task and crawled atop Heero smirking. Heero only frowned, but the twinkle in the glare he bestowed Duo was enough to assure him that Heero was all bark and no bite.

“You are certainly going to be a trial to endure.” Heero said as he reached up to run his fingers through the long fall of hair that hung like a cape over them both where Duo sat on his stomach hovering over Heero with an evil grin plastered on his face.

“You strike me as the type who likes a good challenge.” Duo purred and Heero smiled.

“I never back down from a challenge.”

“Oh good. I was hoping you’d say that.” Duo said sliding down Heero’s chest to lie atop him, his head pillowed on Heero’s chest. Heero’s fingers still toying with long strands as he combed and caressed the fine length.

“You knew I would. We have had the same dreams, I know you as much as you know me.” Heero said holding his living cover and brand new lover closer.

“Aye.” Duo sighed living in the moment of shared bliss. “Strange, but I’ve never been happier. You won’t hear me complaining about it.” Duo chuckled and Heero rolled to pin Duo beneath him, where he proceeded to kiss him for all he was worth.

“Nor I.” Heero said smiling as the kiss broke and they just looked deeply into one another’s eyes, savoring each other for however long it lasted. However, to a vibrant and boisterous Duo, a few minutes worth of adoring looks was long enough.

“Um Heero, either kiss me again, love me again, or get off me. You’re heavy.” Duo grunted and Heero smiled.

“Not to mention I can hear your stomach growling. How about we continue this later and eat now?”

“RO THANK YOU! A man after my own heart! Let’s eat, I’m starved.” Duo said sitting up and going to fix breakfast with Heero by the fire.

“Lorena must have a wicked sense of humor to pair me with you. I am positive she is enjoying this from where she sits in her thrown.” Heero said shaking his head. He and Duo were like night and day in personality, yet somehow it worked.

“Didn’t you know all Goddesses have a sick sense of humor? Have you ever seen a porcupine male try and mount a mate? Now THAT is just damn mean of them. I mean a prick daring another prick and one prick in just the right...” Duo began when a hand shot over his mouth.

“I have the image thank you. No need to elaborate.” Heero said shuddering.

Duo just smirked and tore into the leftovers from the night before.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Breakfast was an arduous affair as Quatre tried to nibble dried jerky around sore lips. “Grah! I give up. How do you chew this? It’s like leather!” Quatre asked no one in particular since Trowa was out and about somewhere else. Setting his food down with disdain and stepping out of the tent in order to check around the grasses and the general vicinity for berries or something more edible to try and eat.

“Get out of the sun you, I want you to heal in the shade.” Trowa’s voice sounded as he stepped into view from out of tall grasses.

“I’m looking for food. I’m afraid I just cannot eat what you left for me. I’m sorry.” Quatre said digging his toe in the dirt in humble apology.

“I didn’t leave you anything. I was coming back to see if you were awake.” Trowa said frowning.

“There was dried red meat there next to me on the mat when I woke up. I thought...” Quatre began and Trowa began to laugh.

“Travel Rations Quatre. I must have missed a piece when I was packing this morning.” Trowa said taking Quatre’s hand to lead him back to the tent.

“How do you eat it? You must have fangs like your golden cat beasts, I couldn’t even bite it.” Quatre asked and Trowa grumbled.

“I try not to eat it. It is a bit tough, but it lasts and travels easy.” Trowa said as he lifted the flap and allowed Quatre to enter first.

“True, but at least you’re planning. I don’t know what came over me, just up and leaving with nothing.” Quatre said flopping down on the ground.

“It’s called being half asleep when the Goddess gives you orders. I’m sure you’re not the only one just heading out with nothing more than the shirt on your back.” Trowa said tossing some grain and water into a pot to set on the fire.

“You’re probably right. I’m sorry I’m being an added burden to you.” Quatre said and Trowa turned and frowned as he set the pot to cook.

“Quit that.”

“Quit what?”

“Apologizing for things that are beyond your control. It’s all right Quatre, you are not a burden to me.” Trowa said moving to sit beside the smaller man on the floor. “If anything, I have never been happier in my life than right at this moment.” Trowa said as Quatre smiled and leaned against his side.

“Me too.” Quatre said with a sigh, resting his head on Trowa’s shoulder. “I always wanted this.”

“Me too. And I plan on keeping it if I can.” Trowa replied wrapping his arms lightly around Quatre’s shoulders. They sat in silence for a long time, eyes closed in prayer, and wishing that at their journey’s end they would indeed be allowed to stay together.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The sky was ablaze in brilliant hues of deep orange, gold, and rich purple as the sun sank below the horizon. Behind Trowa’s tent he’d set up a large canvas structure, which he had filled to the brim with water.

“It’s ready Quatre.” Trowa called as Quatre bounded out of the tent.

Still fully clothed.

“Quatre, you don’t bathe like that. Get undressed.”

“But my clothes need washing too.” Quatre said and Trowa chuckled.

“That’s what this tub is for. Give me your clothes and I’ll wash them while you wash.” Trowa said and Quatre’s jaw just dropped.

“This is an extravagance, are you sure there’s enough water?” Quatre asked and Trowa smiled.

“Yes, I’m sure. Strip or do I need to strip you?” Trowa said, a wicked grin spreading across his lips.

“Goddess you are evil.” Quatre said blushing and ducking behind the tub.

Pale shoulders came into view as he undressed in some privacy. Trowa however was not about to go through the trouble of setting up the bath without a peek at least. He moved to a better vantage point.

“Trowa, play fair. If your bent on seeing me naked do me a favor and offer me the same view.” Quatre said smirking over his shoulder as his robes slipped to the ground.

Pale flesh, smooth and virtually hairless was uncovered and Trowa swallowed hard. Quatre's backside was firm, taut, and slender, with perfect curves and angles no matter which way he tilted his head.

"Ashura bless me, I have never in my life seen anything so beautiful." Trowa muttered under his breath. As Quatre slowly turned to face him, literally catching Trowa's intake of breath instantly in his throat with the view.

"Did you even hear me?" Quatre asked and Trowa had to tear his eyes away to look up and meet Quatre's gaze.

"Huh?"

"I thought so. I said play fair. If you are going to ogle me, at least return the favor." Quatre said smiling and in a flash of limbs, Trowa tore off his coverings and moved to crush Quatre in an embrace.

Lifting up Quatre and climbing into the tub with him, Quatre laughing as he clung to Trowa's neck as he was swept up and caught off guard.

Trowa settled in behind Quatre and held him close. "Oh this is much better." Quatre said with a sigh as the water surrounded him while in Trowa's embrace.

"You like?" Trowa asked giving Quatre's a little splash in the face.

"Mmmmmmm." Was the only response to Trowa question.

"It gets better. Lean forward." Trowa said and Quatre did as told and sputtered as water was poured over his head, soaking his hair. Then a sweet smelling fragrance filled the air as hand began to massage a lotion like oily substance into his hair and scalp.

Trowa's fingers scratching in all the right places, sending chills down Quatre's spine.

"Oh, Shira YES! That feels soooooooo Good." Quatre moaned and Trowa chuckled.

"I can tell, you have goose flesh all along your back." Trowa said rinsing the soap from Quatre's hair.

"Oh let me do that!" Quatre said turning to face Trowa. Smiling brightly. "You have to feel that!" Quatre said taking the cup from Trowa's hand, making him lean forward so he could return the favor and wash Trowa's hair.

Several inarticulate groans of pleasure later, Quatre rinsed the suds from Trowa's hair. "Goddess, you're right. That felt incredible." Trowa said sitting up and with a snap of his head flinging his hair back and out of his face.

"I told you. Now where's the soap? There's more than hair to clean." Quatre said grinning and laughing and looking like an adorable and drowned golden god. Bouncing with glee and making a mess with the splashing, okay so they were both making a mess as they played like small children rather than two grown men in the bath.

The water was long past tepid, and both men were clean from the tips of their noses to their wrinkled toes before they finally began to feel a chill and had to crawl out of the water. Wrapping in Furs, and giving Quatre's clothes a quick scrub before hanging them to dry and moving into the tent to keep warm.

Trowa flopped down to the mat and patted the space beside him. Quatre falling down beside him still heady with delight and filled with laughter.

"How do you feel now?" Trowa asked and Quatre smiled brightly.

"Better than I ever have." Quatre said as he lay back looking up at Trowa. "The salve worked wonders, I'm not sore at all. I feel cleaner than I ever have, and best of all, you're here." He added and Trowa smiled and leaned in close.

"The feelings are mutual." Trowa said closing the space and placing a tentative kiss on Quatre's lips.

No flinch, only a contented sigh as lips slightly parted in welcome.

The kiss deepened and grew ever more intense as furs began to part and expose bare flesh to wandering hands and touches.

Everything around them blurred as their focus turned inward and to each other as lips sought contact and breath hissed through teeth as passions came alive.

Knowing tomorrow would see them upon their journey again; this was their last night of peace and rest. An unspoken understanding fell upon them; there might not ever be a tomorrow.

It was time to live in the moment, and live they would as they clung to each other in the darkness, devouring kisses like each one would be the very last.

Need to purge the loneliness, and shed the demons of solitude and isolation began to consume them both. Hearts raced, and blood thundered in their ears as they gasped for air in between kisses that worshiped flesh and bone.

Every curve and plain explored and touched with lips and fingers. Trowa was burning with need and terror.

The conversation of the night before plaguing his subconscious, he didn't know what to do; he knew the physical aspects but nothing else. He was terrified of hurting Quatre. And he faltered in his kisses. Quatre just rolled, pushing Trowa to his back and attacking his neck with kisses.

"Quatre..."

"Shhhh. I know, I can feel it; nothing is against my will Trowa. I want you too." Quatre said nipping at Trowa's earlobe.

"But, how? What if you get hurt?" Trowa gasped as Quatre straddled his middle.

“Have faith.” Quatre whispered leaning over to press against Trowa’s chest and kiss a line across his jaw. Before sitting up and smiling down at Trowa, the flask that held the lotion soap in his hand. “I smelled aloe yes?” Quatre asked and Trowa nodded.

With no more warning Quatre poured a goodly amount in his hand and coated Trowa’s length in the thick oily conditioning soap. It felt divine as slick fingers began to stroke him as Quatre spread the mixture.

Head thrown back and eyes shut tight with pleasure Trowa didn’t see Quatre move until he felt a different sensation wrap around him.

Trowa’s head snapped up and his eyes went wide as he watched Quatre slowing welcome Trowa’s length into his small body. Quatre’s face showing only mild discomfort as he adjusted himself, slowly lowering his hips, then the slight look of pain shifted into joyful pleasure, as Trowa became fully seated within tight confines of flesh.

“Oh Ashura Goddess of light! Quatre!” Trowa groaned, his eyes almost crossed as the most wondrous sensations of joining began to fill his core.

“Trowa, oh Trowa.” Quatre moaned as he began to move, his hands planted on Trowa’s chest to assure his balance as he began the movements that would bring them both to completion.

Names howled into the night like wolves baying at the moon as a pace was set and driven to a thundering tempo.

Trowa lifting his hips from the mat to meet Quatre’s every shift downward. The friction intense, blinding in fury, and an almost painful pleasure began to build in a slow rolling boil along over sensitized nerve endings.

“T-t-t-TROWA!” his name was ripped from Quatre’s throat as Trowa felt a warm sensation cover his stomach muscles and chest and a grip so tight encased him, he forgot to breathe as Quatre’s name was similarly sung a few moments later as years of pent of passion and loneliness was emptied from his very soul into the young man who now meant more to Trowa’s heart in one day than the twenty years worth of clans kin around him.

Quatre was his world, his center, his reason for living and dying.

Whatever road the Goddesses sent them down, so long as he traveled by Quatre’s side, his world would be paradise.

Sweaty and tired, two bodies collapsed together as ragged breathing filled the tent. It took great effort for Quatre to move, but when he tried to shift off Trowa to keep from crushing him, two arms came up to hold him in place.

“No, please. Stay there, you’re not too heavy.” Trowa spoke softly, as he took a great lungful of air followed closely by a few more.

Quatre didn’t even have the energy to agree or disagree; he just melted and lay sprawled where he was.

“Are you hurt?” Trowa asked running fingers threw damp blonde hair.

“Do I seem hurt? Nay. That was beautiful.” Quatre said never lifting his head from Trowa’s chest.

“You’re beautiful.” Trowa said pulling the covers up over them to keep from getting a chill. And holding Quatre to his heart as an exhausted and sated sleep overtook them where they lay still aglow with mutual pleasure.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

CHAPTER SEVEN:

The dew was thick on the tall blades of grass as two quiet young men prepared to leave on their journey. The rustle of footsteps on packed earth the only warning to Trowa's senses. He didn't bother to turn around.

"Catherine, stop. Go back." He said and the footsteps stopped.

"You're not coming back, I had a dream." She said and Trowa turned.

"No you didn't dream. Don't let anyone hear you say you did Catherine." Trowa said under his breath. "You know they'll kill you if they think you're tainted." He added as Quatre came out of the tent and stopped to watch what was going on.

"I know. But..."

"But nothing Catherine, go back to your bed, keep silent about it, and forget me." Trowa said pushing his sister away with words. She was as gifted as he was, but she was a woman. Men became Gods, women were killed, so their parents had hid their daughter's gifts while their son was ostracized and made a god of the clan.

"I will never forget you and what you do for me and for them with not so much as a kind word of thanks. Trowa I'm so sorry." Catherine said close to tears stepping forward.

"No Cathy, don't touch me. You know the laws, stupid as they may be, they are the laws and I'm not to be touched. For Ashura's sake Cathy, go back to your bed, go back and live." Trowa pleaded in hushed tones, for his sister's sake.

"But Trowa..." Catherine said grabbing her brother's hand. "Listen to me, in my dreams you die! You cannot leave!" Catherine begged and now Quatre stepped forward.

"He's right, go back. Nightmares of what may be, not what will be. Have faith in him." Quatre said locking his eyes with Catherine's where she wavered a moment, caught in his stare.

"Have faith." He repeated and Catherine stared at him.

"Have faith." She repeated in almost a monotone.

"Pray for salvation, be happy and be at peace." Quatre chanted in soft tones akin to wind blowing gently through reeds.

"Pray, be happy, at Peace." Catherine repeated turning around and walking away back to her tent.

"Quatre, what did you just do?" Trowa asked stunned.

"Nothing that will harm her. It's nothing more than the power of suggestion. She's no longer worried by her nightmares. I just reminded her of her faith that she had lost sight of." Quatre said sadly turning to face Trowa.

"You are an Angel." Trowa said wrapping his arms around Quatre's shoulders.

“Nay, I’m not even close, Trowa. I’m sorry. But I feared her state of duress. She’s a wild card.” Quatre said and Trowa chuckled.

“You just summed up Catherine in two words. Aye, she is a Wild Card. She’ll be all right, she always is. The clan will be safe with her here. She is like me, she’s my twin sister after all.” Trowa said and Quatre smiled.

“Twins?” Quatre asked and Trowa nodded.

“Yes, even though we don’t look anything like each other, we are. Thankfully my curse became apparent first, it gave my parents warning. So when Catherine showed signs, they hid them.” Trowa said with a rueful smile.

“Better to be apart from her with her living, than apart from her in death.” He added and Quatre nodded.

“Aye. That is true. I had twenty-nine sisters and I had to watch fourteen of them be murdered for being born like I was. The others were lost before my birth, all but one. Iria was the only one born without the curse she was also firstborn, she’s had to watch us all leave her.” Quatre said turning toward Zozma. “Iria breeds these horses, Zozma was a gift from her in a way.”

“How so?” Trowa asked as Quatre imparted his history in the pre dawn stillness.

“This mark of Shira’s star on her forelock. It means to some of my clan as a bad omen, a curse. Zozma would have been killed for it. But Iria refused and had Zozma brought to me. We’ve been together ever since.” Quatre said fishing a lump of sugar out of a small pouch attached to the saddle to give his beloved mare.

“That would explain why she’s glaring daggers at me. She’s jealous.” Trowa said chuckling and reaching up to pat Zozma’s flanks. “It’s all right girl. I don’t mind sharing his attentions with you.” Trowa said in jest and he was taken aback as the horse only snorted while bobbing her head as if in agreement.

“She... did... NOT just understand what I said.... Did see?” Trowa asked and Quatre almost giggled.

“I wouldn’t put it past her. She’s far too clever. Clever to the point where nothing she does anymore surprises me.” Quatre said as he adjusted the blankets on her back.

“I believe it.” Trowa said strapping down a pair of light saddlebags on her rump.

Carrying only the barest of essentials. Travel rations of jerky, some rice grains, flint stone to make a fire, a small hunting dagger each for protection as well as skinning meals caught along the road, and their sleeping mat that they would still share, rolled up and stowed away. They were ready to begin.

Quatre mounted Zozma’s back, Trowa climbing up behind him and even before the sun broke the horizon to greet the oncoming day-- two young men were already following their path Northward.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Treize awoke in a cold sweat, his nightmares raging once again. He turned to the figure tossing and turning beside him. Having the same terrors rage within it appeared.

“Zechs, wake up.” Treize urged, lightly tapping a shoulder.

Zechs opened his eyes and met Treize’s concerned stare. “The same Dream again for you too?”

“Aye. And I have another sign, he came to me tonight, my way-fairer has sent me message.” Treize said and Zechs nodded.

“Lorena has told me so. We must go to Dead Centre, together.” Zechs said and Treize nodded.

“That was also my message. Go to the temple of J’mi, to the truth bearers to learn.” Treize said and Zechs nodded.

“Aye, J’mi’s temple is in Dead Centre, where the Great Wars Began. But there have been no Truth Bearer’s in over a thousand years. Unless the legend of the sleeping ones are real and have been reawakened.” Zechs said pursing his lips and furrowing his brow in thought.

“I have no idea what you just meant, I have not the knowledge of all your history. But I’m not going to argue. I’ll ready my private ship, we’ll leave before it’s too late.” Treize said going to get up, only to have a large white cat jump up into bed between him and Zechs.

“Czarina, you’ve had your peep show for one evening my lady. It is time you become a proper Shaman of the Way Fairer’s Feline and earn your keep as a ship’s cat. Now down with you lady, no time for you right now.” Treize said shooing her down the bed so they could get up and dress, and hopefully sneak away before Dermal and his Father figured out what was going on between the Prince and the “prisoner” from Rhye.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Heero didn’t know what was worse, the soreness in his feet, or his backside. Saishi was not built to be a riding beast, the sharp angle of his back and his loping step had made it a challenge just to stay abreast of him and not fall off, let alone ride comfortably.

Duo however looked none the worse for the wear.

“Quit moping, you’ll get used to it.” Duo said as they set up camp for the night.

“Easy for you to say. You aren’t walking around like there is a bonfire raging where gonads used to be.” Heero grunted and Duo laughed so hard he snorted.

“Balls on fires?”

“And then some.” Heero said lying down on the ground with a moan.

“Poor baby.” Duo said a Heero shot him a glare.

“False pity will only land my foot up your backside so you may share my pain.” Heero said as Duo started the fire.

“You’d have to catch me first.” Duo said coming over closer and digging in his hip pouch.
“But I can help. I won’t tease.” Duo said pulling out a few packets of various ground powders.

“Here, I’ll make some tea, then stir that in. It’ll dull the pain and relax your muscles. I remember what it was like in the beginning learning to ride too. But you will get used to it in a few days I promise. By the time we reach Dead Centre, you’ll be riding like you’ve been riding all your life.” Duo reassured and Heero smiled weakly.

“I doubt I’ll be a master, but so long as I have you and your magic bag around I think I’ll survive.” Heero said as Duo moved to boil water.

“No magic Heero. Just Ro’s handiwork, everything in my bag grows or lives somewhere in Maxway-Ells. Just don’t ask me where I get some of these things from, you really don’t want to know.” Duo said and Heero frowned.

“If you are about to shove mold or worse down my throat tell me.”

“No. Just have faith it works as I tell you it does.”

“Duo, tell me.”

“No, trust me.” Duo countered tossing leaves into the boiling water to brew.

“I don’t trust you as far as I can throw you. What are you making me ingest?”

“You really want to know?”

“Did I not just ask you repeatedly?” Heero asked with an irritated growl.

“Okay if I tell you, you have to promise to still take it.”

“Oh Lorena spare me! You’re scaring me now.” Heero said rolling his eyes upward in a helpless gesture.

“Promise me Heero.”

“OKAY!”

“Dried Mill worm, Willow Root, and Guano.” Duo said and Heero cocked an eyebrow.

“What’s Guano?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Oh not this AGAIN! DUO TELL ME!”

“Bat shit.”

Duo's announcement was greeted only with a glare that would have killed him where he stood had Heero had the power.

"Don't look at me like that Heero, you ASKED! I TOLD you that you didn't want to know. Now take it like a good boy or suffer in pain your choice." Duo said shoving the cup of tea at Heero.

"If I ask you again, please lie to me." Heero said stirring in the powder, closing his eyes and drinking as quickly as possible.

"I never lie. Sorry. If you ask, be a big boy and take the truth." Duo said grinning.

"I just drank worms and bat shit, you had better not kill me." Heero said shoving the cup back to Duo.

"It won't kill you, and you'll be feeling no pain soon. Trust me." Duo said taking the cup and moving back to the fire.

"I do trust you, else I wouldn't have taken that foul potion." Heero said rolling to his knees gingerly and moving to skin the small pheasant Duo had managed to capture for Dinner.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

tbc.....

Guano *IS* Bat Shit, I didn't lie there folks. And Native Tribes in South America, Africa, hell anywhere you find bats, DO use it for several purposes. Its number one use is as a Fertilizer, and Horticulture experts consider it the BEST fertilizer in the world.

It's incredibly expensive though.

DEAD END -----