

Andrew Franklin Simcoe, apparently, grew up listening to grand stories at his father's knee. Not so unlike a lot of other kids, hearing dear old Dad, and senile old Gramps swap tales of the good old days. Only the stories weren't really tall tales like most kids heard. The Simcoe family legends of derring-do and heroics... were pretty much true.

It seems that the Simcoes had a long standing history of serving their country. And their country just happened to be Sanc.

Andy Simcoe's Dad was the loyal family retainer who risked life and limb to fulfill the dying request of Zechs'... uh... Millardo Peacecraft's Dad. He was the unsung hero who spirited the Peacecraft children to safety while the castle burned to the ground around them.

And Andy grew up hearing all about the fine Prince Milliardo who would someday return and... set things right in some vague, undisclosed way.

Apparently, the wee little Princess, rescued on that same day, was the equivalent of chopped liver. Or maybe dear old Dad was just the world's biggest chauvinist pig. It was The Prince who would some day return in glory and lift the Kingdom of Sanc back to... something.

This, children, is what we call a recipe for hero worship.

And worship, Andy F. Simcoe did. With a fanatical passion so focused that Relena Peacecraft Darlian eventually became an obstacle to the return of the Glory Days. Nothing but an annoying deterrent to his own father's dream.

And any moderate to fair psychologist will tell you that children are always striving for their parent's approval. What better way to win Pop's approval than hand delivering to the man, the day he'd been talking about since Andy was old enough to remember?

Prince Peacecraft stepping into his father's grand mantle.

We'll gloss over the part about the son becoming a murderer, and assume that revealing that aspect to Dad wasn't in the plan.

If you could call Andy-boy's attempt at the world's strangest political coup, a plan. Years in the making, it had been the most haphazard damn thing ever, when he finally tossed it into motion. Not a plan, so much as a fantasy.

I do have to make one tiny little mental apology here; Zechs' security clearance procedures didn't turn out to be nearly as messed up as Heero and I had been assuming. There had been not a single sign in Simcoe's history that gave a hint to his feelings on the Peacecraft subject. He had not been a sudden, recent addition to the band of black suited security that Zechs surrounded himself with. After a childhood spent on L3 where the Simcoe family had fled from the implosion of Sanc, the guy had been spinning somewhere in Zechs' general orbit for years. Through his family history, serving in the same military branches, and then finally in his after-war capacity of loyal hound... uh... security member.

But apparently, simmering underneath that steadfast, faithful exterior had been an interior just seething with bitter resentment at the upstart little girl who had burst on the scene and gotten in the way of Daddy's dream.

Never mind that 'Vice Foreign Minister' was a far cry from 'King of Sanc'. And never mind that Zechs had not wanted a part of either one of those things.

Dad Simcoe was not to be disappointed. Or hell... probably, after all those years, the dream was as much a part of the son as it was of the father.

The Sons of Adam had quite a different dream, one that I couldn't agree with a hundred percent, but I could see some of their points.

Animal rights. It's a concept that required some thought. Yes, animals are living creatures with feelings and personalities all their own, that don't really have much of a way of speaking for themselves. So these guys have taken on the somewhat admirable job of speaking for them. I get that; that's cool enough. Though I don't always understand the part where the 'speaking up for' seems to happen more often for the cute animals than the ugly ones... but I digress. Anyway, my only real issue with the good ol' SoA boys is... how do you really know what the animals want to say? I've seen a good number of animals on the more affluent colonies and even heard of a ship's cat or two... and they always seemed just as happy and content as their Earth-bound counter-parts. Who are these guys to say? That ocelot I transported to L3? I did a little research on the girl; being one of only a handful on the entire colony, she went to one of the largest, most prestigious zoos on L3. She has a habitat roughly three times the size of anything she'd ever known on Earth, and a brand new, potential suitor. I'd watched vids of her romping through an environment that I would not have known was an enclosure if I hadn't read it. And I had no doubt that if she'd been given a choice between where she was now, and where she'd been... her new digs would have won hands down.

Yes, I *did* have a moment of guilt wondering if I'd had a hand in doing something less than ethical, and not like I could have undone it... but I'd wanted to know.

My conscience, thank you very much, is completely clean on the animal export subject.

But back to the Adam sons; I have no real beef with their basic gig. Up until their less than well thought out encounter with Simcoe, they'd been a pretty low-key group. They'd staged some sit-ins and a couple of their members had gotten fined a time or two for dumb-ass moves like throwing paint on models in fur coats. Not exactly on your average Most Wanted list. And, apparently, that was part of what our dear Andy had played on; nobody really took the SoA seriously. Hell... I'd never even heard of them before the kidnapping fiasco. Andy was going to get them noticed. Was going to make people take them seriously. Was going to get their message out there.

And all they had to do was follow his simple little plan. And he was going to be handling the really dangerous part anyway, right? The kidnapping of Relena Darlian right out from under her security's collective noses? And if anything at all tells how amateur those boys were... that right there did. That they bought into the whole kidnapping thing, and never realized that the real plan was assassination right from the start.

But Simcoe, they tell me, can be a smooth talker when he doesn't have bullet holes in him. He got their attention with the snub to their egos that they were just a two-bit operation. He fed their hopes and dreams on talk of Big Things. And when they were teetering right there on the edge of following through? He tipped them on over when he realized their ring-leader's views on life.

Dietcoke guy... Hardy, was an old school, card-carrying homophobe of the highest order. And when Simcoe had gotten down to the brass-tacks shove into a life of crime, he'd banked on the part where I was an old school, card-carrying homosexual. A

match made in heaven. If you can't whip a zealot into a frenzy with their own agenda, whip them into a frenzy with their own hatred.

I'm sure it had all seemed like a dream set-up to Simcoe. All those years of resentment and yearning towards a better Sanc world, handed to him in a chance encounter with a group so delightfully easy to manipulate it wasn't even funny. It had been all it took to spur him into a previously only day-dreamed about action. It had probably seemed to him like some divine sign.

But it was the amateur issues all the way around that made the plan crumble under its own weight. The secret agendas, the lies, the timing... it all ended up falling apart, the plan failed, the principal conspirators were all in jail and in the end?

In the end I just kind of felt sorry for Andy Simcoe's Dad.

At least this time there wasn't going to be a three-ring circus of a trial. When the Sons had figured out they'd been used like cheap canon-fodder, they'd rolled on Simcoe to a man. Not that rolling was going to get them out of trouble, but better to face kidnapping charges than attempted murder charges. It was no guarantee that Heero and I wouldn't be seeing the inside of a courthouse at some point in the proceedings, but full confessions tended to make things go faster.

Thank God, because that court thing might make for compelling television, but it was seldom that interesting in real life.

But then, television made a lot of things look more interesting than they are in real life. Like remodeling. There are entire broadcasting stations devoted to this whole do-it-yourself crap. They make it look so easy too; people go to the super, has every cool kitchen gadget in the world store, things are ordered, some dust flies and... viola! Brand spanking, shiny new kitchen by the end of the episode.

What you don't see are the decisions that come down to a flipped coin just to avoid another argument. What you don't see are the endless delays when the important thing you needed for step two got back-ordered and nobody told you. What you don't see are the nightmare weeks of take-out because you went ahead with step one before finding out that step two was going to be delayed by two weeks.

And they don't show you how that flying dust settles freaking everywhere. Even after hanging plastic sheets in the kitchen doorways.

Oh yeah... we're talking first hand experience here, did I not mention that?

Which is why I really shouldn't have been surprised when I walked into the house with the pizza we'd decided on, to find Heero in the middle of our battleground of a kitchen staring down into a new box looking like he was trying to set it on fire with the power of his mind.

'Uh... is that the sink, finally?' I ventured, trying to keep the hopefulness out of my voice since the look on his face kind of hinted at bad news.

'Yes,' he replied, and didn't even look up at me. Maybe he was getting somewhere with his pyro act and didn't want to lose his focus.

'Is there... something wrong?' I asked, careful of his frame of mind. I was not looking at the visage of a happy man.

'You tell me,' he finally growled, and I stepped closer to peer down into the depths of the big packing box.

'That's... an under counter mount sink,' I said, blinking at the damn thing disbelievingly.

‘That...’ he said, with a gusty sigh that was just asking for patience, ‘would be the problem.’

‘You have got to be shitting me?’ I couldn’t help saying, even knowing it was not a joke Heero would make after the last few weeks. ‘They’re... they’re going to have to reorder, aren’t they?’

‘Suppose so,’ he replied, voice finding a calmness I was having trouble believing in.

‘And that’s going to delay things another two weeks?’ I asked, though it was hardly a question. And God knows why I felt compelled to ask it anyway. Not like it wasn’t something we both didn’t know full freaking well. The counter was somewhere in the mists of that mysterious place where such things come from... being cut for a totally different type sink.

‘Oh no,’ he said, and I could hear the temper under the calm. ‘They’re going to expedite this.’

I waited for the ‘or’, but he didn’t bother to deliver it. I can only assume his Preventer side didn’t want to make it pre-meditated by confessing out loud. The whole remodeling gig had been a bit harder on him than it had been on me; you do not have to cook ration bars.

Not that having the place torn to hell wasn’t getting on my nerves too, I just didn’t have the added anxiety over the quality of our intake. Heero is something of a, shall we say, ‘stickler’ for the whole healthy nutrition deal. But despite my ration bars being packed with more vitamins, minerals, and easily consumed nutrients than just about anything he could think of serving; they bugged him on some fundamental level. They somehow had come to represent a... lack in my life after the war. Like a meal being hot made it better in some vague, indeterminate way in his mind. I really don’t know what his deal was, but the things just drove him crazy.

And I think it was causing him physical pain to admit that they were probably better for us than any of the fast food we’d ended up consuming over the past long weeks of renovation joy. The occasional bag of bucket chicken was one thing, every night was something else. But between work and the remodeling itself, we really didn’t have time for fancier sit down places that had things on the menu that didn’t involve grease in some form or other.

Deciding that nothing much else was going to come of staring dejectedly into the big box at the sink that was not ours, I maneuvered around it to get into the refrigerator sitting in the middle of the room, out of the way. Or... more in the way, depending on your outlook. Out of the way of the workers, I suppose, would be more accurate. Thing was in our way most of the time. The door would only open half way with the box sitting there, and I almost dropped the pizza box trying to juggle out my soda and Heero’s pitcher of tea.

There was a sigh behind me that I wasn’t entirely sure about. The sink? The pizza? The soda? All of the above? I decided to let it go in case it deteriorated into an argument that really didn’t have any sides.

‘So, other than the obvious ordering mistake there,’ I asked, ‘how did the day go?’

The sigh was deeper, as though he thought I couldn’t hear him with my back turned ‘Not... well,’ he said, taking the pitcher and leading the way into the dining room,

pushing the plastic aside for me, since my hands were full. I waited to see if he'd elaborate, and he made me wait while he rummaged through the box on the table that contained the dishes, looking for a drinking glass. I opened the pizza box while he poured his tea and when we sat down across from each other, I found that same dejected stare on his face, only directed at the pizza box.

'Not well?' I finally prompted and got yet another sigh.

'Nobody showed up until almost two o'clock,' he informed me, watching the pizza like he expected to see it crawl out of the box and attack our cholesterol. 'And then all he did was sand the drywall seams, patch a couple of spots and tell me he'd see me tomorrow. He wasn't here an hour.'

I opened my mouth to blurt something out about him wasting a whole vacation day for nothing more than that, but realized it was kind of a... 'no duh' sort of statement, and just shut my mouth again.

'Yeah,' he agreed anyway, and finally took a slice of pizza, looking like he'd almost prefer grilled iguanas.

'But he's definitely coming back tomorrow?'

'That's what he said,' Heero replied and for a second, I thought he might actually throw his slice of pizza back in the box. 'Though when I... pressed for a time, he got rather... vague.'

I wondered just what 'pressed' meant and hoped Heero hadn't given the poor guy a heart attack. If all that happened was a little drywall sanding, I'm sure it had just been Darryl and not the crew leader. Kid was pretty quiet and I had little doubt one of Heero's serious glares would have made him wet himself.

'I didn't traumatize him,' Heero grumped and made me have to hide a grin behind a bite of dinner. 'I'm saving my irritation for a phone call to the damn store manager tomorrow.'

'You still planning on taking off work?' I asked, feeling vaguely guilty about that part. Preventers' agents have a slightly better benefits package than Preventers' mechanics, and Heero'd been doing the lion's share of the babysitting.

'Don't see how I can't,' he replied, 'as long as they're scheduled to work. I don't want to be responsible for any more delays.'

I picked up my second slice of dinner and watched Heero take his first bite, chewing it like he was eating cardboard. 'I've been thinking about the schedule and had an idea today,' I ventured, pretty sure Heero would jump all over anything that would make this mess in our house go away.

'What?' he asked, expression somewhere between skeptical and hopeful.

'Darryl was telling me why they're in and out so much, the other day...' I began, but hesitated when Heero gave me a weird look.

'He... talks to you?' he said, the skepticism winning out.

'I'm not the scary one,' I grinned and it made him snort.

'Anyway,' I continued pointedly, 'he was telling me that a lot of the off time is while they wait for stuff to dry. It'll take them several work days to do the painting and I doubt if they'll even start until next week now. If we did the painting ourselves, we could have it all done over the weekend. Then they can start right in next week on the cabinets and stuff.'

'I'm not paying somebody else to do the work, just to do it myself,' he groused.

‘So negotiate it off the bill,’ I soothed. ‘If they do it, it’ll be Wednesday before they’re done. If we do it, we could have both coats on and be ready for them by Monday morning.’

He had to think about it, chewing slowly while he mulled it over. I’d stated my case and just let him; I knew the only thing keeping him from agreeing immediately was his irritation, and he was rather good at setting that aside given half a chance.

He must have been really irritated though, because we’d finished dinner before he finally gusted another of those heavy sighs. ‘Fine. You’re right. I’ll bring it up when I call the manager tomorrow.’

I hadn’t really meant for it to be an ‘I’m right/you’re wrong’ sort of thing, so I just gave him a smile and dropped it. ‘Hey, if it makes you feel any better, we have that dinner planned at McMurphy’s tomorrow night, so at least once this week we will not be eating fast food.’

The comment didn’t serve to lighten his mood as I had hoped though, in fact... there was a second where I swear he looked even more irritated. He covered it quickly, but there really wasn’t any mistaking his... lack of enthusiasm.

‘I promise to eat a salad?’ I tried, fishing for some sort of reaction that didn’t involve sighs and frowns, and I finally won a smile.

‘Sorry,’ he muttered, glancing down into the dregs of his tea, ‘but you have to admit I’m not Victoria Brannigan’s favorite human being.’

‘Well, Hayden likes you,’ I soothed. ‘Toria will come around. Eventually.’

Heero just snorted and gulped the last of his tea. ‘Assuming she doesn’t just kill me first.’

‘She would never...’ I began and then grinned. ‘Ok, maybe she would, but Hayden wouldn’t let her.’

It got me a dry chuckle and a rueful shake of his head. ‘So I don’t need to take my gun?’

‘Hey, she’s not *that* bad!’

‘You were passed out when she threatened to... *remove my balls from my person with a dull butter knife*, I believe was the line,’ he dead-panned, ‘and something about making jewelry out of them.’

I could imagine that. Well, not Toria actually doing so, but I could imagine her delivering a line like that. At full volume. Looking back, I realized when he was talking about; that overly ambitious turn I took at the L2 Expo. Just from the little bit of yelling I’d overheard, it’s a wonder we hadn’t had security breaking the door down.

‘You just confuse her,’ I grinned, thinking about Toria’s strange reaction to Heero. He raised an eyebrow, begging for clarification of a theory he obviously thought was bullshit. ‘She’s half afraid of you,’ I explained. ‘And that pisses her off at herself, so she has to go all bluster and attitude.’

He just blinked at me, looking like he doubted my sanity. ‘Afraid? Of me? Victoria ‘don’t make me kick your ass’ Brannigan?’

‘Yeah, but when you get pissed... she pays attention,’ I informed him and watched him think about it. ‘She doesn’t back down from much of anything, but she backs down from you. And if I know Toria, that just drives her all kinds of crazy.’

‘So,’ he said hesitantly, ‘she has to get in my face to prove to herself that she’s not intimidated by me?’

‘Bingo,’ I grinned and was surprised when his answering grin was a little bit smug.

‘You two really *are* a lot alike.’

‘You do not intimidate me, Yuy,’ I grumbled, deliberately ignoring the point. He grinned wider, but let it go with that. It wasn’t an argument I stood any real chance of winning and we both knew it, but at least he let me leave the field with my dignity intact. Mostly.

I was actually kind of relieved when my phone rang and I was assured the subject would be dropped. So relieved, that I didn’t even bother to check the number when I pulled it out of my pocket. ‘Maxwell here.’

‘Mr. Maxwell, this is Aleyah Winner’s secretary Ms. Tartan, can you be available tomorrow for a short business meeting?’ said a strange voice in my ear, and I hesitated for a second trying to process several bits of information at once. Aleyah had a secretary? And since when did Aleyah *ask* me anything? I was usually just summoned. When I, apparently, took too long to formulate a reply, the curt voice grew... amused, and continued. ‘I work for the gallery as well, Mr. Maxwell, the call for a meeting is being coordinated through me at Mr. Lee’s request.’

‘Ah,’ I managed, brain jumping beyond the ‘who knew’ aspect. ‘I uh... have work tomorrow.’

‘Ms. Winner mentioned your ‘unfortunate state of employ’,’ the voice replied genially and I couldn’t judge if the humor was at Aleyah’s wording or at my unfortunate state. ‘Might I suggest an early lunch? Ms Winner won’t be available until after ten, and Mr. Kirby has a three o’clock flight to catch. It shouldn’t take long, Mr. Maxwell.’

Yeah, I’d heard that lunch hour thing before, but I didn’t express that. ‘Sure... pencil me in for eleven. At the gallery?’

‘Perfect, Mr. Maxwell,’ I was praised, and there was something in the tone that made me think of Aleyah; I couldn’t decide if it was the ‘good boy’ feel, or just the crisp efficiency. ‘Present yourself at the front desk tomorrow at eleven. We’ll see you then.’ She didn’t waste time on pleasantries, disconnecting the call after my grudging acceptance.

‘What was that all about?’ Heero wanted to know after I’d hung up, and I echoed one of his earlier heavy sighs.

‘I... think I’m about to find out the results of Jack Lee’s popularity poll,’ I hedged, and it took him a minute to make the connection. It had been weeks since I’d finished Lee’s mural, after all.

‘I’m sure you got it,’ he told me, smiling that weird little smile I’ve come to identify as... faith.

I couldn’t help a slightly self-deprecating chuckle. ‘I’m not even sure if I should say *I hope so*, or *I hope not*.’

‘As much as you’ve been stewing over it?’ he teased, and since I didn’t want to have to admit he was right about something else, I rose to start clearing the table. If he got the smug look again, I didn’t have to see it.

Thursday night is usually laundry night, but when I headed that way, I discovered that having the whole day stuck at the house, Heero had pretty much taken care of all of the Thursday chores, the Friday chores and most of the weekend stuff too. There wasn’t a

thing that needed doing, so after I'd showered and cleaned up, I wandered out to my studio to putter around while Heero settled to catch the news.

I had not been able to resist doing some sketches of Relena after I'd realized she was interested. I tried to tell myself it wasn't blatant sucking up, but come on... our relationship was best described as 'tentative' and anything that might improve it needed to be given half a chance. For Heero's sake, of course.

Of all the doodles and half-assed attempts to find an image of her that wouldn't offend, irritate, or upset anybody involved... the one that had stuck in my head was the picture of her with the borrowed security headset held to her ear, her head cocked to the side with that faraway look in her eye.

It had gone from sketch to painting, and had been sporadically taking my attention for the last week. I found myself poking at it, trying to get the sweep of her hair to meet my satisfaction. I had yet to make up my mind if I would give the thing to her when it was done, and I think that was what was causing my problems with it; who it was going to belong to in the end. The idea of presenting it to Relena was doing odd things to my creativity.

I had, in fact, spent so much time dinking with details that did not matter, that I think the stupid painting had lost its balance somewhere along the line. While Relena's expression was still only half-formed, the security ear-piece was so meticulously detailed it could have been used in a damn advertisement.

I ended up avoiding the issue by working on the hair.

Relena is a pretty girl. Woman. Not movie star material, I don't suppose, but more the wholesome girl-next-door kind of lovely that captures the imagination as much as the eye. I had been trying harder to set aside my resentment towards her of late; I was a bright enough boy to realize that a lot of it had been spawned by some bizarre, nebulous jealousy on... hell on both our parts, I suppose.

Or maybe she'd started out disliking me because I shot Heero, and not so much any sense of jealousy. I had a little trouble looking back on that night with any clarity; the whole thing is too shaded now by the horror of 'what might have been'. One of those moments in my life that my mind twinges away from thinking about.

My first impression of Relena was simply that of a pretty girl in the wrong place at the wrong time. Though I seem to recall quickly amended that to a pretty girl with a screw loose, when she threw herself in front of my gun to protect the guy that had been about to kill her.

It didn't get complicated until a bit later, when Heero went from random psycho on the beach, to... well, to be bluntly honest, non-random psycho in a Gundam.

Not bluntly honest enough? Fine... I don't know what the hell it was that made him go from psycho to obsession. I could make some quip about the spandex, but it was more than the handsome exterior. It was... his drive? His strength? His dedication? His skills? All of the above?

Hell, maybe it was just that mysterious 'hard to get' thing.

I don't know, but he drew me in like a damn magnet, and that was pretty much the final rites for any sort of relationship Relena and I might have managed back then.

Because Heero'd drawn her in like a magnet too, and I might not have done anything about my attraction, but if I had been as painfully obvious as Relena had been... well, it's no wonder we never really hit it off.

Funny how black and white the world can seem when you're that young. I had been able to tell that Heero cared for her, and it had seemed the perfect little fairy tale... never dawned on me that he could care for her in any way that wasn't romantic.

I heard the man in question come in to the room about then, and heard him hesitate in case I was 'in the zone', so as not to disturb me. When I turned, giving him a smile to acknowledge his presence, he came to join me in front of the easel.

'How's it coming?' he asked, settling his hands on my hips and dropped the ghost of a kiss on the side of my neck.

I couldn't help a grunt of frustration. 'It's not,' I informed him. 'I just keep stirring paint around.'

'It doesn't look a whole lot different than the last time I looked,' he agreed, a hint of amusement in his voice.

'What?' I grumbled, 'you don't see the three new hairs and the shadow on her elbow?'

He chuckled, and his hands slid on around my waist. 'You're just stressing because of who it is.'

'No shit?' popped out before I could catch the words, but he just chuckled again.

He kissed the spot he could reach again before he said, 'Maybe you should just pretend you're painting it for me?'

I mulled the idea over, turning it in my head like a crystal, looking for the flaw. I was kind of surprised to realize that he somehow knew what my problem was with the painting. I don't suppose I should have been, he was certainly well aware of the... 'tentative' nature of the non-relationship we had going on. And I suppose that right there was the flaw I was looking for. The rather big flaw. We stood there in silence for a few minutes, watching the brush twirling absently in a blob of paint on the palette.

Trying to imagine doing the painting for Relena was making things awkward, mostly because of the history. What I had seen in her in that moment with the security headset, might not necessarily be something she would be pleased to see in herself. Trying to imagine doing the painting for Heero was just as awkward, but in a vastly different way.

'Could you have loved her?' I heard myself ask, and was pleased that it came out sounding almost unconcerned. Blasé, I believe, is the word.

He didn't rush to answer, just rested his chin on my shoulder and really seemed to be looking at the painting. I got a squeeze of his arms when he finally said, 'I don't think so,' accepting the implied 'not gay' part of the hypothetical without making me spell the question out to the last letter. 'We have enough problem just being friends sometimes.'

'Yeah?' I had to prompt, surprised by the statement. I hadn't realized there was any sort of major friction between them.

He made a noise that was somewhere between wry amusement and indulgent frustration. 'I admire Relena's philosophies, but I'm afraid I won't ever be able to embrace them personally the way she wishes I could.'

The pacifist thing. Kind of a big part of who Relena was. What she was all about. And while Heero had a vested interest in maintaining that peace... he had a much more practical outlook on the 'how' part. Practical in my opinion, anyway. As long as there were such things as ambition, greed, and entitlement... peace was not something that

would just maintain itself. There would always be a need for people... warriors... to stand up and defend it.

I guess I could understand where the difference in philosophies could maybe make pillow talk a little... uncomfortable.

Is it sad that actually getting to hear him confirm something that was really a non-issue, left me feeling weirdly relieved?

I didn't voice either thought. 'Guess I can see that,' was the best I came up with. Heero chuckled softly, mindful of his proximity to my left ear.

'I used to feel bad about it,' he confessed. 'When we were younger. She was always so... hopeful. I think she just thought if she was patient enough, I'd come around.'

'She always seemed pretty damn confident in you,' I said, remembering the doe-eyed look the girl would get sometimes. 'Hell... she had a lot of people convinced it was just a matter of time!'

He sighed a weary sort of sigh that spoke of a whole lot of patience, a little bit of youthful confusion, and maybe a touch of heartache. 'Yeah. I know.'

It crossed my mind to ask about the conversation that eventually had to have happened between the two of them, but then I decided it was maybe none of my business, and let it go. 'It's getting late and one of us has work tomorrow.'

'Yes, boss,' he chuckled, probably as ready as I was to drop the subject, and left me to cleaning up my paints while he made the rounds and closed up for the night.

I found myself feeling faintly embarrassed for having asked that question, at the same time that I couldn't quite let go of that weird relief. I think it was the history thing again; all those years that I'd been out trying to forge a life of my own, something apart from what I'd been, up to that point. I'd missed out on a lot of shared history, and while I felt like I was starting to fit in more comfortably, I knew there were forever going to be things come up that I just didn't share.

Like softball games, weird holiday traditions, and ex-almost-girlfriend melodrama.

Most of the time, the rest of the history that I *did* share, the whole mad scientist/war/Gundam/terrorist thing, was enough. But sometimes I just felt that gap a little more keenly than others.

Just sort of seemed to be one of those introspective nights, I guess.

Left me thinking about those old days, and I wondered if I'd ever apologized to Heero for shooting him. Seemed like something I should have done, so when I finished putting my paints away, I went upstairs and did just that.

For the record, I was forgiven.

The next morning, I wasn't sure whether to feel guilty or relieved as I headed out to work. I couldn't decide if I was being kept from the action, or escaping the battlefield. I didn't envy whoever showed up to finish prepping the kitchen for the painting; even if Heero was reserving his ire for the store manager, I'm sure the house was not going to be a warm and inviting place to be working in.

Though, between my lunch meeting and my dinner plans, I had more than enough to keep my mind off remodeling woes. Especially since I wasn't at home in the middle of them.

Ever wonder why I have so much drama that involves my meals? Funny how that had never occurred to me before. Wonder if it would do any good to swear off eating?

I've often thought that there is probably not a ton of difference between a garage full of mechanics and your average class-room full of ten year olds. Well, maybe the level of inappropriate jokes. Or... maybe not. Whichever, you'd think a group of grown men would act more like grown men, and less like they needed adult supervision.

Though... I wonder if that's why Griff sort of acts like a father figure? A kind of grumpy, cantankerous, somewhat merciless father figure?

At any rate, I can stand witness through several life experiences now, that grown men plus nice weather, equals grown men becoming unruly little boys who are bored in class. It had kind of been a long week of very little focus on the part of most of the guys, and I suppose I have to fess up that my own head hadn't exactly been on the job.

It had been one of those weeks that really drove home how much I'd adapted to life as a ground-bounder. At first I'd had trouble dealing with the time structure, sometimes having to be reminded of the days of the week, but I had truly embraced the concept of Friday. The whole 'thank God it's' part in particular.

Fridays are kind of cool for a lot of reasons. The obvious, primary one being that lead-in to the weekend thing. But even beyond that, it seems to get marked with special treats and rituals just for the sake of the day. Like the donuts that Griff brings in every Friday morning. Or how Giles usually meets his wife for lunch just on Fridays. And Dave told me once that his family eats out every Friday night.

Heero and I should really come up with something better than just finishing the laundry.

That particular Friday I knew was going to be a total waste of time when I arrived and heard Griff bellowing at somebody before I even got clocked in. Something about donuts and grease and being raised in a barn.

It's probably a good thing there was nothing worse on the docket than a windshield replacement. A gas tank repair might have ended up with the garage getting blown to kingdom come.

I got a broad grin and a good morning from Giles as I elbowed him away from the donut box. 'Leave some for the rest of us, buddy!'

'Hey, I didn't take the last glazed,' he said, licking a bit of chocolate frosting off his fingers. 'I know how grumpy you get if you don't get your Friday glazed donut.'

'Not my fault Heero doesn't believe in sugar and deep-frying,' I grumbled, scooping up the sticky treat. 'I never get them at home.'

'Sounds like my wife,' he sighed, eyeing the box like he was considering a second one. 'It's been nothing but oat bran ever since my last check-up and she found out my cholesterol is up.'

'Guess that's what happens when you get old,' I teased, taking my donut and heading for the job board.

Giles hesitated for another moment, before snatching up a cake donut and following me. 'Don't make fun of the aged,' he intoned solemnly. 'Your day's coming.'

'Only if I don't die of boredom first,' I muttered, looking over the offerings on the board.

'Dibs on the... ' Giles began, but Bobby suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and whatever the job order had been, it was snatched from the board.

‘Mine!’ he crowed victoriously and I thought he was going to get a donut shoved up his nose for his trouble.

‘Stop stealing all the damn easy jobs!’ Giles growled, and I snorted... there wasn’t anything on the docket that didn’t fall into the ‘easy’ category.

‘You mean clean,’ Bobby chortled, waving his scrap of paper in the air as he headed across the bay. ‘You just don’t want to have to get all cleaned up to meet Maureen for lunch!’

‘That too,’ Giles conceded under his breath, and while he was distracted, I took my pick of the remaining jobs. We do a million oil changes a day, I’d much rather take the oddball jobs we don’t get all that often.

So I spent my morning removing the windshield from a car that had had an unfortunate run-in with a brick, while half listening to Dave and Giles argue about the best way to grill out. It was like listening to some sort of bizarre war game preparation... smoke point, flare-up, searing, propane? I kept waiting for them to whip out photos of their respective grills and start comparing sizes. I’d never known what a competitive thing outdoor cooking was before I worked in a garage. When Dave turned to me at the height of the discussion and suddenly demanded, ‘Duo! Gas or charcoal?’ it was a relief to be able to tell them,

‘Sorry guys, I have to get going. I’ve got an appointment and I’m taking an early lunch today.’

‘Lame, Maxwell,’ Giles jeered. ‘Cheap excuse for dodging an important public opinion poll about the quality of...’

Dave tossed a dirty shop rag in the general direction of Giles head with a roll of his eyes, ignoring the rambling attempt to lend legitimacy to their time wasting conversational topics. ‘Where you going, Duo? Something for that remodeling job you were telling us about?’

‘Appointment with my other boss,’ I told him with a wry grin, while I wiped off my hands and prepared to take my leave. ‘One of those *brunch* meeting things.’

Dave looked impressed, but Giles just laughed, tossing the dirty rag on in my direction. ‘What you wanna bet the rest of us will be back from lunch before you are?’

‘Not taking *that* bet!’ I said, dodging the rag on my way to Griff’s office. ‘I’ve been down this road before.’

Which was precisely what prompted me to stop on my way out, to make sure Griff knew it might end up being a long lunch. ‘Ok if I’m late getting back, boss-man?’

‘Define late,’ Griff wanted to know, not taking his eyes off whatever paperwork he had laid out in front of him.

‘I have no idea,’ I confessed, ‘but Aleyah Winner is involved.’

He snorted and raised an eyebrow, giving me a glance over the top of his store bought reading glasses. ‘If you ain’t back by three, you can burn a vacation day.’

‘If I’m not back by three, I’ll have died of boredom by committee and you can keep the vacation day and just send flowers to my funeral,’ I quipped, leaning against the doorjamb to his office.

He gave out with a weird little snort of a laugh that somehow didn’t sound all that amused. He pulled his glasses off entirely and really looked at me before shaking his head. ‘You sure don’t strike me as the type to put up with all that high-brow crap,

Maxwell. Never would'a thought I'd hear one of *my* mechanics use the word 'brunch' and not be making a joke.'

'Hey,' I grinned, 'that high-brow crap is paying for my kitchen renovation. And who says I wasn't joking?'

He just stared at me for a moment more in a weird way that made me think he was mulling over some comment he ended up not making. Putting his glasses back on, he bent back to his forms and just gave me a wave that was clear dismissal.

I headed for my car just as Giles and Dave made the leap from gas to lighter fluid, and the last I heard, Dave was calling Giles a pyromaniac. I rather hoped they weren't still at it by the time I got back.

The drive from the Preventer building to the gallery wasn't long, but I had time to pull out my new cell and make a quick call to check on Heero. I'd hate to have to admit it to the guy, but the darn phone had ended up being pretty easy to get used to having around once I'd let myself get over being irritated. I'd been pissed when the old one had become a casualty of the kidnapping, but Heero had replaced it practically before the dust settled.

'Do we still have a contract?' I teased him, after we'd gotten past the hello part. 'Or did you fire them all?'

'Hardly,' he snorted. 'I'm not planning on taking up cabinetry any time soon. But I *do* have all three workers here, and the manager will be out for a visit after lunch.'

'No shit?' I asked, impressed despite myself. 'I didn't think he ever left the store. Did you talk to him about the painting thing?'

'Yeah,' Heero admitted, a slightly feral tone coming into his voice. 'And he jumped all over it. He's promised they'll have everything prepped by the end of today and ready to go. He's personally coming out to pick up the bad sink, and he swore he'll have the new one in by the time we need it, even if he has to drive out to the factory to pick it up himself.'

I couldn't help but laugh at the notion. 'And what the hell are the guys doing that is taking all three of them?' I asked, imaging three construction workers madly taping, mudding and sanding drywall, while sneaking furtive glances at my partner, waiting for him to explode.

'Uh... about that,' he said, and I could imagine him making the hand through the hair gesture. 'That kid...'

He hesitated and I supplied, 'Darryl?'

'Yeah,' he agreed. 'He's doing the last touchups on the drywall, and the other two are getting the cabinets ready to go in.'

'But, they can't...' I began, and got one of those sighs I don't much like over the phone.

'They're doing the assembly work in the living room,' he said in a rush, cutting me off and leaving me blinking at the car in front of me.

And there goes another room to the mess, I thought, but decided not to sound unhappy about it. 'Well,' I ventured, looking for the positive spin. 'I guess that'll speed things up next week...'

'That was the plan,' he replied, sounding a little bit relieved. 'I know it's going to be more inconvenience, but I just want this done. It seemed like a reasonable compromise.'

‘It’s a plan,’ I agreed, because when your home is turned upside down, what’s one less room in the long run? ‘And I am at the gallery, so I have to go.’

‘Good luck,’ he told me warmly, and we signed off as I parked my car. I swear he was more excited about the whole weird deal than I was. Mostly.

The gallery display had switched out since my show, and was currently some sort of abstract thing by some single name artist whose gender seemed to be indeterminate. I wondered what the idea was... trying to be mysterious? I was drawn to take a look, but the moment I was through the front door, the girl working the desk was announcing me over the phone to somebody, and pointing me toward the back. I dutifully followed the mimed directions; perhaps another day.

I passed through the arch, and was momentarily disoriented by the latest layout of the gallery. It looked nothing at all like it had the last time I’d been there. ‘Rain’ was apparently a much more prolific artist than I was, and the space they filled was probably three times what had been opened up for my show. But I had to stop gawking at the cavernous room before me, when I was greeted by the voice I recognized from the previous day’s phone call. ‘Mr. Maxwell, right this way.’

Ms. Tartan was not at all what I had been expecting. I’m not sure what I had envisioned, but it hadn’t been the tall woman with the purple streak in her hair, that I found waiting for me. There was the hint of an amused smile at my momentary double-take, as though she liked throwing people off their stride. Standing in a doorway that would otherwise have been invisible, she was a flare of color against a neutral, office-type background.

‘This way,’ she prompted again, and I felt like I had been summoned by a teacher for being unruly in class. I fought the faint blush and followed where I was directed.

‘This shouldn’t take long, Mr. Maxwell,’ she assured me as she ushered me through the door and led the way down a rather utilitarian looking hallway. I felt like I was getting a peek behind the curtain at the real Great and Powerful Oz.

Woman was nothing like anybody I could imagine in the company of the prim and proper Aleyah Winner. From the bottom of her practical Reeboks to the purple streaked hair with – I swear to God – a knitting needle jammed through the back, I was just not seeing it.

‘Ms. Tartan, I presume?’ I said, trying not to wince at the lame line, but she graced me with a chuckle of appreciation for the attempt.

‘The same,’ she replied, taking us around a corner and deeper into the building than I would have thought possible.

‘You... uh... work for the gallery?’ I ventured, trying to make polite conversation, but slightly distracted by the vague disconcerting surrealness of the whole thing.

‘Hard to believe, isn’t it?’ she returned, leading me to an elevator that fell more into the ‘freight’ category than I would have expected.

‘What?’ I blurted, looking up at her, slightly aghast as I realized how that must have sounded. ‘No... I just wondered who... I mean... Uh...’ Perhaps it was not politic to ask who had actually hired her? I tried to change conversational direction, but just couldn’t find a direction that wasn’t just as bad.

Her grin took on a wicked cast that was kind of frightening. ‘Oh, Miss Winner and I get along just fine, Mr. Maxwell. We have an understanding; she doesn’t critique my fashion sense, and I don’t eat her little dog for lunch.’

The rest of the ride was... pretty quiet.

The elevator only took us up one floor, but the difference was like night and day. I was finally in the area that screamed all the pompous, high-brow, over-indulgence that I had been expecting.

Ms. Tartan abandoned me with a certain sense of glee, in a meeting room that was more living room, to the tender mercies of her employers. ‘Have a good day, Mr. Maxwell,’ she told me on her way out, and I wanted to ask exactly how she meant that, but she was already shutting the door behind me. And Aleyah was right there to continue screwing with my balance anyway.

‘You’re late, pet,’ she informed me, despite the fact that it was still at least five minutes to the hour, but I’ve come to understand that Aleyah operates on Aleyah time. Aleyah time is pretty much whenever she’s ready for whatever, and the hell with what you *thought* you were supposed to be doing when.

‘Sorry,’ I told her in an airy sort of way that probably didn’t sound all that convincing. ‘Traffic was a bear.’

She gave me a scornful little sound that indicated she wasn’t buying it, but it didn’t seem to matter, because she was moving on in the very next breath. ‘Come in, dear! Don’t just stand there... have a seat; you don’t want to keep Stanley waiting.’

‘Heavens, no!’ Mr. Lee laughed from where he sprawled in the biggest, comfiest looking chair in the room. ‘God forbid Stanley has to cool his heels for two minutes. Can’t have that, now can we?’

Stanley himself just snorted, ignoring them both as though they had this sort of conversation all the time, and hell... maybe they did. I took a seat in the chair nearest the door, and there we all sat around a coffee-like table with a lunch spread of finger sandwiches and fruit that surprised me. Mr. Lee was settled back with a plate, appearing to have a sample of everything on the menu, while Mr. Kirby was nibbling distractedly at some sort of sandwich that, I swear, looked green. Aleyah occasionally reached out and delicately plucked the random grape or strawberry from the artfully arranged plate, but nobody offered me anything, so I just sat and waited for them to get to the point.

Might have known that Jack Lee would be the one to get down to business. ‘I assume you know why you’re here, young man,’ he told me, and while it was more a statement than a question, I agreed anyway, just to have something to say.

‘Yes sir,’ I said. ‘I guess so, anyway. The mysterious project?’

‘I told you he was a bright lad,’ Aleyah murmured, her attention seemingly more on the plate of fruit in front of her than me.

I glanced at Stan Kirby, but the guy had something of a poker face and I couldn’t read him. He was just sitting there with his green sandwich and letting the other two do the talking. They had a weird dynamic; they were all obviously rich and powerful people, and they had just as obviously known each other for a very long time. They seemed as comfortable as siblings, at the same time there was an odd friction under the surface. That strange rivalry I’d witnessed at the gallery, I suppose.

I had a feeling hanging out with the three of them for any extended period of time would give me a headache.

‘So, am I finally allowed to ask?’ I prodded the room in general, mindful of the fact that I was on my lunch hour, and things were starting to have a draggy kind of feel. Like... I could end up being there all afternoon.

If I was going to have to burn one of my precious few vacation days, it would be in relation to my kitchen remodeling, and not a ‘brunch’ meeting.

‘Indeed, you are,’ Mr. Lee chuckled and unsprawled just a bit to face me fully. There was a moment or two of silence that I took as my cue. Damn man was actually going to make me ask.

‘And the mysterious project would be...?’ I said dutifully, barely keeping the sigh behind my teeth.

Aleyah did it for me though, sighing in a disgusted sort of way. ‘Jack, dear... do get on with it.’

Behind them, at his corner of the table, Stan Kirby suddenly sat his plate down and the conversation shifted focus. ‘You may or may not be aware,’ he informed me, ‘that next year marks the sixth anniversary of the destruction of the L5 colony. They’re finally erecting a memorial, and the gallery has been approached to produce it.’

I hate to have to admit to the momentary short-circuit that news produced in my brain. I just sort of sat and stared at him, and he just sort of sat and stared back. I’m pretty sure I was supposed to say something, but I was still working my way through some mental leaps in a strange slow motion.

L5? Wufei’s L5? A memorial? Some sort of painting? Six years? Already?

‘What?’ I finally managed, and Mr. Kirby looked both aggravated and vindicated all at the same time. He picked his plate up and sat back with a huff.

‘I hope you two know what the hell you’re doing,’ he muttered, and I felt my face go up like a flame.

‘Stanley,’ Aleyah chided. ‘Don’t be such a grump.’ Then she turned to me and I was given a look that told me to get my shit together.

‘Keep up, Mr. Maxwell,’ Mr. Lee chuckled, not as politic as my patron. ‘We’ve chosen you to design the new memorial... if you think you can handle the job.’

It was a question that I would have given a lot to know the answer to.

‘What...’ I began, trying to get my brain into the proper gear. ‘What kind of memorial? Where’s it going to go? What kind of dimensions are we talking...?’

Where would they put something like that? Was there a museum somewhere? Would I get a wall? Something bigger? What the hell kind of painting would do justice to... to... well, you know.

‘Eventually,’ Aleyah informed me, ‘it will be housed in the Sanc kingdom Memorial Peace Gardens. After the tour. But darling Jack has negotiated the right to have the unveiling here at the gallery. Quite the coup.’

Mr. Lee grinned broadly, looking quite pleased with himself. I let them share their congratulatory looks while I stripped mental gears. Tour? The images I’d had of museum walls went out the window. ‘Uhm... can we get back to what kind of memorial we’re talking about here?’ I ventured, and it drew Stan Kirby back into the conversation.

‘A sculpture, Mr. Maxwell,’ he told me, eyeing me with a bizarre intensity. ‘Think you can handle it?’

‘I’m not a sculptor,’ I blurted, but Aleyah just gave me the pish-pish noise of disdainful dismissal.

‘You don’t need to be, pet,’ she soothed. ‘We have people for that. All you need to worry your pretty little head with, is a design.’

There were a whole lot of one-liners that wanted to come out of my mouth at that moment, and I didn’t even get any help from my repress hamster... Francis found the room a little intimidating. All that was forming was starting to sound like Heero’s litany of investigator words; what? Where? How? Are you out of your God damn mind?

Oh wait... wrong litany.

‘I’m gonna go out on a limb,’ I heard come out of my mouth, ‘and guess that you have not a thing in mind, and I’m just supposed to pull some awesome idea out of my... out of thin air?’

I thought Jack Lee was going to hurt something laughing. ‘Such a delight!’ he crowed. ‘Yes, Mr. Maxwell... pull something awesome out of your ass and amaze us all, if you please.’

‘Jack!’ Aleyah scolded, and did that thing where her expression was shocked at Mr. Lee and pleased with me all at the same time.

‘How long do I have?’ I had to ask, with a vague feeling of *déjà vu*.

‘We’re going to need the preliminary sketches in three weeks,’ Mr. Kirby broke in, sounding like he was making a point he expected an argument over. I didn’t hesitate to meet his gaze... wasn’t going to contest the point. No way in hell was I going to be able to wing *this* one.

‘Are there any guide-lines at all?’ I tried, not sure whether to expect any help or not. Some part of the back of my head was trying to tell me to tell them to fuck off if this was going to be another one of those weird mystery projects.

‘Of course, darling!’ Aleyah said airily, waving the very notion away. ‘This isn’t another silly little project like Jack’s commission. This is quite serious.’

‘The reputation of the gallery is riding on it,’ Mr. Kirby had to chime in and I kind of wanted to glare at him for feeling the need.

I managed to bite my tongue on the *gee thanks* part and toned it down to a mere, ‘I understand.’

‘Of course you do, pet,’ Aleyah praised, ‘As soon as you turn in your designs, we’ll move forward with...’

‘Assuming I accept the job,’ I had to insert, seeing the whole process lining up in front of me like a row of dominos. Wasn’t about to board an Aleyah Winner agenda train without at least knowing the destination.

She gave me a startled look and was opening her mouth to deliver what I can only assume would be a scathing tongue lashing when Mr. Kirby cut in with a chuckle.

‘First sensible thing I’ve heard come out of your mouth yet, Mr. Maxwell,’ he said dryly. ‘Maybe this isn’t as hare-brained an idea as I was starting to fear.’

It shut Aleyah up, at least for the moment, no doubt I would get my brunch performance critiqued later, but for the moment she was content to allow my small rebellion to win points with her buddy Stan. I think I was lacking in that quarter.

‘Excellent!’ Mr. Lee suddenly said, just sounding as pleased as a kid on Christmas morning. ‘Our Ms. Tartan will have the information packet for you, Mr. Maxwell. If you could let us know by Monday morning if you’re up to the challenge, we’ll get this show on the road!’

It was dismissal, and an attempt at psychology, and some sort of weird smugness all rolled into one subtle ball. As if on cue, the door behind me opened and I was being taken in hand by the mentioned receptionist and I had to wonder if the woman had been listening at the door.

She came past me and deposited the missing Coquette into Aleyah's arms, handed some papers to Mr. Lee, and snagged a finger sandwich from the table. 'Your driver will be here in twenty minutes, Mr. Kirby,' she said in passing, and verbally scooped me up on her way out. 'This way, Mr. Maxwell.'

What could I do? I said my goodbyes and went 'this way'.

I was breezed off, handed a thick envelope marked 'private' and what appeared to be a boxed lunch. I barely had time to blink before I was deposited back on the freight elevator and told one last time to have a nice day.

I suppose that part would all depend on your definition of 'nice'.

There was nothing much between my ears but a vaguely hollow humming sound. The walk out of the gallery was done on autopilot and the drive back to work was something of a blur.

Sometimes crap just comes out of nowhere and leaves you feeling like you were caught with your virtual pants around your virtual ankles.

I will confess that I'd had several weeks for my somewhat over-active imagination to gnaw on the possibilities of the Great and Mysterious Project. And gnaw on it, I had. I won't even go into all the scenarios I'd run through the 'what if' paces, since they were all pretty moot at that point anyway. But I do have to say... a traveling memorial for the anniversary of the suicide of an entire colony had not even made the list.

I had to force myself to leave the information packet in the car when I got back to the Preventers building, or I knew I wouldn't get any work done for the rest of the day.

Not that, you know, productivity was likely to happen anyway.

My lunch hour hadn't turned into the afternoon I'd been afraid it would, and I arrived back in the garage before most of the other guys. Though Dave was there and just throwing away his take-out bag from RJ's, the grease-pit across the street.

'Hey, Duo!' he greeted, 'how'd your meeting go?'

'As bizarre as most meetings go with those people,' I told him, setting my box lunch down on the hood of the car I was supposed to be working on, and prepared to open it.

'What ya got?' Dave wanted to know, and came over to peer down into the thing with me.

'The receptionist took pity on me,' I said as I pulled out one of those green looking sandwiches. 'Uh... I think.'

'What the hell is that?' he asked, and kind of pulled back like he was afraid I was going to make him eat it.

'I have no damn idea,' I had to confess, and took a sniff.

'Guacamole, maybe?'

'I have no clue what guacamole smells like,' I said, but it didn't exactly smell *bad*, so I nibbled on a corner. It didn't taste a lot different than it smelled; nothing I wouldn't eat if offered, but nothing I would bother to seek out on my own. Dave looked like he was waiting to see if I would keel over. 'Want to try it? There's two.'

He gingerly took the offering and did the same tiny nibble thing I'd done, before grinning broadly. 'Not bad! Now I can tell my wife I had some kind of cultured lunch thing!'

I looked back down into the box at the tiny little triangles of sandwiches and the carefully segregated fruit. 'What makes it cultured?'

'Dude!' he scoffed, 'because they cut the crusts off the bread!'

He went to clock back in while I finished my lunch. The green stuff was a take it or leave it kind of thing, but I have to admit there was some sort of ham saladish stuff that I could have eaten all afternoon. And the strawberries were some of the biggest and juiciest I'd ever had. I'd had my doubts when the efficient Ms Tartan had handed it to me, but nothing went to waste.

It was about the only thing I didn't waste that afternoon. Never did get the damn windshield put in place, I just pretty much ended up sitting on the hood of the car, mindlessly cleaning and prepping the track, and picking out broken glass while my focus took a vacation in the land of reminisce.

I hadn't been there when the leaders of Wufei's home colony had made the ultimate 'fuck you' gesture to the enemy. None of us had been. Well... except Wufei. Being a pertinent part of the proceedings. But it had been on all the news feeds, and I sure as hell hadn't missed it. It's one of the defining moments of an entire generation; isn't anybody over the age of about sixteen that can't tell you exactly where they were and what they were doing the moment *that* button was pushed.

Me? I'd been at the circus - my first - spending a few hours trying to forget about Oz, Romefeller, Gundams, missions, and mad scientists. It hadn't worked out real well, since the resident lion taming clown had turned out to be an amnesia-suffering fellow pilot. I'd still been trying to muddle through what to do about my discovery, if anything, when the news had hit the feeds.

I can remember feeling shocked. And sick. And kind of pissed, and not really being sure at who. On the one hand, if there's anybody in this universe who understands the 'fuck you' mind set... it has to be little ol' Duo Maxwell. But on the other, there were a whole hell of a lot of people on that tin can, and I just couldn't believe they were all on board with the plan, down to the last mother's child, I don't care *how* damn honorable the act.

Though... I knew Wufei, and I was well acquainted with his pride and his stubbornness. If the rest of his people were even half as hard-assed, I could see them giving the one-finger salute in complete synchronization, down to their last breath.

But I'll never know for sure, which makes it damn hard to decide how I feel about the whole thing.

And I was just starting to understand that that fact was going to make this art job real freaking interesting.

How do you epitomize a thing that you still, six years later, weren't sure how to feel about?

I was so lost in my own thoughts that late afternoon, when Dave tossed a rag at me and suddenly asked, 'Hey Duo? You going to the opening game next week?' that it took me a long minute to figure out what in the hell he was talking about.

'Next week?' I finally asked, after blinking stupidly at him for a moment. 'That's next week already?'

‘Dude,’ Bobby jeered from where he was working on my other side, ‘where have you *been*? They’ve been practicing for weeks!’

‘Well we’ve been kind of busy with the remodel...’ I hedged, bending back to work and hoping they’d tire of the topic.

‘You *still* haven’t gone out to watch a practice?’ Dave wanted to know, and I realized it wasn’t going to get dropped. Dave can be somewhat tenacious when he thinks you’re ignoring his advice.

‘We couldn’t both be away,’ I tried, hoping to imply workers and supervision and... stuff. I have to give Dave credit... he didn’t actually laugh out loud. Not like Bobby.

‘You’re too much of a tight-wad to be payin’ them guys over-time,’ Giles chimed in from across the stupid bay and I glared over my shoulder at him, for all the good it did.

‘Come on, Duo,’ Dave cajoled. ‘It ain’t so hard. It’s like...keep-away, only in reverse.’

That one made just about everybody in the garage stop and look at him, and I could have groaned... Dave hates it when people don’t get what he’s saying, and I knew there was a lengthy explanation coming. I turned and slid to the edge of the hood I was sitting on, propping my feet on the bumper and glanced toward Griff’s office, hoping that ‘Dad’ would come out and tell his wayward mechanics to get back to work. Unfortunately, the boss had probably made a trip up to Accounting, and wasn’t there. I bit down on a sigh and reflected that it was too bad I couldn’t use my repress hamster on other people.

True to form, Dave scowled at the disbelieving looks he was getting all around. ‘Well, how in the hell would *you* guys describe it to somebody who’s never played?’

‘It’s a team sport,’ Bobby said leaving the tire he was changing to come around to lean against my current project, and address Dave more directly. ‘With nine players on a team. The object is to keep the other team from scoring runs...’

Giles chuckled and shook his head, he too stopping what he was doing. ‘I think Dave is looking for the short answer, man.’

Somebody behind me called out, ‘It’s just stick-ball with a lot of rules!’

I resisted the urge to bury my face in my hands... it probably wouldn’t have made them stop anyway. Remember what I said earlier about mechanics being a lot like a room full of unruly little boys?

Yeah.

The teacher had left the class room.

Somehow, and I swear to you, I really don’t know how... the next thing I knew, a tennis ball and a broom handle had been dredged up from somewhere, and I was being acquainted with ‘America’s national pastime’. Like it or not.

We did not have nine guys, but Dave did the best he could with the six of us. Bobby was designated the ‘pitcher’, Giles was on ‘first’ which was somewhere between a Buick and his tool box. Duncan was on ‘second’, and John was playing ‘third’, which translated to standing in front of the soda machine. Dave seemed to be coaching, and I was handed the broom. Uh... the bat.

For the record, baseball is even squirrellier than the drunken spacesuit monkey game.

‘Ok, now see,’ Dave was telling me while Bobby and Giles tossed the tennis ball back and forth with exaggerated windmilling of their arms, ‘Bobby throws the ball across home plate, which would be right here if... you know... we had more room and had a real diamond and stuff. You’re gonna try to hit the ball as far as you can, and Bobby’s gonna try to fake you out so you don’t hit it.’

Giles laughed rather rudely, having to lean wide to catch the tennis ball. ‘Dave, I think Bobby’s going to be doing good just to get the damn ball across the plate.’

Bobby blew him a raspberry and then proceeded to stand there smacking his fist into his hand and for a second I thought he was pissed, but it just seemed to be more of the mugging.

‘Ok,’ I agreed, just to get the show on the road, ‘so I hit the ball, and then what?’

‘Well you kinda gotta pretend there’s a base where the guys are all standing,’ Dave said, waving in the general direction of our impromptu ‘field’. ‘You gotta get to a base before they can get the ball there.’

‘That’s it?’ I asked dubiously. Surely there was more to it than that? All you’d have to do is make sure you hit the sucker far enough that you had plenty of time.

‘No!’ Dave responded, sounding put out that I was implying his game was kind of lame. ‘There’s more to it than that! I was just keeping it simple for your first at bat. There’s all kinds of rules, like if they catch the ball, you’re automatically out. And you have to keep the ball fair, and you have to tag all the bases as you run, in order and...’

‘Come on, Dave!’ John prodded. ‘Give him the rule book later, let’s do this already!’

‘Give me something to aim at, Dave,’ Bobby instructed, cutting to the chase and siding with John.

Dave sighed rather theatrically, but took a couple of steps back and squatted down in a line with me and Bobby. It seemed like a damn dangerous place to be, in a game that involved a guy swinging a big stick around. ‘Now if you miss,’ he was telling me, ‘that’s called a strike and you only get three of them before you’re out.’

‘We don’t have another batter,’ Giles informed him with another of those terribly amused chuckles. ‘I think we can let him swing until he hits it.’

‘Oh,’ Dave muttered. ‘Good idea...’

Bobby did the bizarre windmill thing with his arm again, and then tossed the ball to Dave. I had to lean a little, but my eye/hand is pretty decent, and I bounced the ball off the over-head doors in the back of the bay without any problem.

‘Run, Duo!’ Dave yelled and it kind of surprised me... the guy was really serious. So feeling like an idiot, I jogged over to where Giles was standing. But he was just waving at me frantically.

‘Take second! Take second!’ I glanced around and Duncan was off in the back of the bay chasing the bouncing ball. So I took off for roughly where he’d been standing. But when I got there, Dave started jumping up and down and waving his arms.

‘Go! Go to third!’

John couldn’t seem to decide if he should be coaching me or Duncan, and finally must have decided I already had enough people telling me what to do, so he turned his attention to Duncan. ‘Throw it in, man!’

I kind of got the race part about then, and I'll be damned if some weird sort of competitive... *thing* reared its head somewhere inside, and I took off running for the soda machine.

'He's gotta touch you with the ball, Duo!' Dave was yelling, 'Slide! Slide!'

That kind of made sense in a weird sort of way. More than just a race then; it really was like keep-away in reverse. Doing my best to follow the almost-rules we seemed to be playing by, I aimed at the soda machine and hit the concrete bay floor in a long slide. John yelped and sort of danced out of the way, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the tennis ball bounce off the 'P' in Pepsi and go flying over our heads. John cursed and Giles crowed, 'Go for home, Duo! Go for home!' even as he was scrambling after the ball.

What else could I do? Back on my feet, I aimed for Dave and ran. Couldn't let my team down, after all.

I assume you see what's coming? In all its 'holy crap', little-boys-caught-with-the-cookie-jar-in-a-dozen-pieces glory?

Oh yeah. Guess we all knew Griff wasn't going to stay gone forever.

God only knows what the man thought as he neared his domain and heard his best and brightest screaming 'Run! Run!' and 'Catch the damn thing!' at the tops of their lungs. But I'll tell you what; I'd give a hell of a lot of money for a video of it.

I'm pretty sure Giles and John just sort of faded into the corners trying to look like they weren't involved, but Duncan, Dave and I were sort of caught red-handed since I was charging across the bay, Duncan was hurling the tennis ball in, and Dave was doing his best to guard a non-existent home plate. Dave kind of lost his focus when the side door opened to reveal our awol boss. Consequently, he stopped watching both me *and* the ball. I'd been trying to duplicate the somewhat successful slide thing and once you start one of those... you're kind of committed. I slid, Dave didn't dodge like John had, since he was busy staring at our boss, I plowed into him and the ball sailed right on by, at speed, and bounced off the window to Griff's office with an alarming rattle that had all of us thanking our various deities the damn thing hadn't been a real baseball.

It ended with me and Dave sprawled on the floor, John trying to act like he'd been getting a soda the whole time, Duncan just standing in the middle of the garage with his mouth hanging open, and Giles... I swear... trying to hide behind his toolbox.

It was like a whole herd of deer in the biggest spotlight ever.

Then the tennis ball finished its ricochet and did a slow dribble across the floor, stopping almost at Griff's feet. There was a collective in-drawn breath as we waited for the explosion.

Griff bent down and picked the ball up, looking at it for a long moment while he seemed to be framing his tirade, but when he opened his mouth, all that came out was a heavy, somewhat resigned sigh and, 'You yahoos are about as useless as tits on a bull today... just go the hell home.'

We continued to stare while he stalked over to his office, where he finally seemed to work up a little bit more energy. Turning in the doorway, he glared at us and yelled, 'And come Monday morning, you better have your heads out of your asses and give me some damn *work*, or I'm gonna start docking pay checks!' Then he slammed the door and we could see him muttering to himself while he threw himself down into his chair and went back to work.

Never did give the tennis ball back.

Off work an hour and a half early on a Friday night? We did not have to be told twice. I wasn't the first one out the door, but I sure as hell wasn't the last.

I debated calling Heero on the way home, to let him know I'd be there early, but then decided the explanation would be a lot better in person where I could make gestures to embellish the tale. It isn't all that often that I have anything more interesting to relate about my day than garage gossip and stories that involve oil.

Well... unless an engine has been dropped. Or, you know, there was a kidnapping involved. Or a bus explosion.

Ok, never mind.

Let's just amend that to *amusing* stories and forget the rest.

I apparently wasn't the only one getting off early on a Friday afternoon; when I pulled up in front of the house, it was just in time to wave goodbye to Darryl and his older brother as they pulled a u-turn at the end of our street.

'See you Monday, Mr. Maxwell!' he hollered as he pulled away, and I just waved again. Kid looked positively thrilled to be done for the week.

There was still one extra car in front the house, so I wasn't surprised to hear voices when I made the climb up to the front porch.

'...oh no, Mr. Yuy, if Tom says he'll have that replacement sink by next week, he'll have it,' was what I heard as I opened the front door, and from the tone of the crew boss's voice, he was probably damn glad to see me come through that door. I think I've mentioned that the lot of them seemed to find Heero a little bit... unnerving.

The conversation stalled when I walked into the middle of it, and I did indeed get a broad grin from Larry. Though I saw Heero give me a quick once over, and I'm sure if we'd been alone, he'd have been verifying I wasn't home early because of some problem.

'Looks like it's a day for playing hooky,' I commented to Larry genially, as much to put Heero's mind at ease, as anything. 'You guys all done for the day?'

'Got as far as we can until the painting is done,' Larry told me, jumping on the offer of a new conversation with both feet. He gestured around at the mess my living room was in, though he hardly had to; not like I'd missed it. There was mostly assembled cabinetry and empty boxes everywhere. At least they'd put drop cloths down first.

There was a weird, awkward moment where nobody could figure out whose turn it was in the conversational area and I wondered if Heero had been in the process of reading the guy the riot act over the sink order or something, and my arrival had derailed it completely. Larry gave out with a slightly over-enthusiastic laugh to fill the lapse.

'Well, I guess I'll be getting out of here too,' he said, and he seemed to be trying hard not to make eye contact with Heero. 'You guys have a good weekend, and we'll see you bright and early Monday!'

Poor guy couldn't get out the front door fast enough, and I had to chuckle as we stood on the porch and watched him pull away. 'Dude, you really have to stop scaring the hired help.'

Heero just snorted. 'Maybe the hired help shouldn't be so easy to intimidate.'

'They're pretty good guys,' I had to point out, and Heero smiled in a way that I'm sure those guys would have found scary.

‘I just like to make sure they remember who’s signing the checks,’ he said, and turned on that note to go back into the house.

‘I thought *I* was?’ I retorted in mock indignation, but it didn’t faze him.

‘You may be supplying the funds, but I believe I made the down-payment,’ he replied, holding the door open for me.

‘Is that semantics, or a technicality?’ I wanted to know, and just got laughed at.

‘So why *are* you home early?’ he asked, derailing my tangent before I could follow it too far. I caught him eyeing my manila envelope, but he didn’t ask.

‘Because I am a useless yahoo?’ I quipped and then thought better of it... that rather sounded like I’d gotten fired. ‘Or... I am part of a crew of useless yahoos.’

There was the implication of a slow blink in the quiet moment it took him to ask, ‘Uh... pardon?’

I grinned, making my way through the maze of boxes and construction chaos.

‘Griff gave us the afternoon off out of the sheer goodness of his heart?’

That drew a snort of disbelief. ‘Somehow, I doubt that.’

I tossed the envelope from the art gallery on the table as I passed through the dining room, Heero trailing after me. ‘Ok, so the guys were trying to explain the basics of baseball to me and Griff took exception to the lesson.’

‘Why is it,’ he wanted to know, as he watched me dig through the fridge for something cold to drink, ‘that whenever you explain things, I usually end up more confused than when I first asked?’

Since we would be heading out for dinner in a few hours anyway, I really didn’t want more than a few swallows of something, and opted not to open a bottle of soda. ‘Just my effort to keep you entertained,’ I grinned and took a drink straight from his pitcher of tea.

‘Barbarian,’ he grumbled good-naturedly, but took his own drink when I passed it over. Hell, I’d be more inclined to use a glass if I could freaking find them in less than ten minutes.

I ignored the comment, since it wasn’t really relevant to the main conversation, skipping back to address his original point. ‘Ok, so Griff threw us out of the garage for the rest of the day because he caught us playing stick ball in the bay with a broom handle and a tennis ball.’

He didn’t even snort his tea, though I’d been trying hard for the effect. His look was pretty priceless though.

Since we had a place we had to be, I went about getting cleaned up and ready to go while Heero followed along after me, listening as I told the whole sordid story, complete with the windmilling hand gestures.

I do so love to make him laugh.

Sometimes though, I get a little caught up in that part, and sort of forget what all the amusing story is revealing. Somewhere between the showering and the dressing, his expression took on a thoughtful cast that, unfortunately, went right over my head at the time.

I spun the tale out to the confiscated tennis ball part while we were sitting on the side of the bed, and I was lacing up my shoes. Done with both things, I looked up expecting to find him grinning at me in that way he has when I have his undivided

attention. And I suppose the look I found was focused, but not in quite the way I'd been expecting. Oops?

'Duo,' he asked in a kind of careful sort of way, like he was picking over his words with great deliberation, 'are you uncomfortable going to my softball games because... you've never played?'

I suspect 'because you don't understand the game' was what got edited out of that question, and I had to give him credit at the same time that I was kind of embarrassed anyway. Well, here we were having that conversation that I guess I'd known for months we were going to have to have, even though I'd rather been avoiding it. With a sigh I tried to cover up, I pulled a leg up on the bed so I could sit more facing him, and tried out a sheepish little grin. What the hell? If we were going to have the conversation, might as well have it.

'Actually,' I confessed, 'I'm kind of uncomfortable with it because I'm trying hard not to horn in on something that's a you and Wufei thing.'

For the record, you can tell when a person is biting the inside of their cheek so that they won't laugh out loud. He managed to contain it to a funny little noise that still conveyed large amounts of amusement. 'I wish I had known that, because Wufei has been hounding me since last season about why I won't invite you, but I didn't want you to feel obligated if you weren't interested.'

I didn't bother doing my own biting, and just about gave myself a hernia laughing my ass off. 'Oh God, but we suck at communication sometimes,' I blurted out, though if there was ever a comment that was stating the obvious, that was it.

Heero hooked an arm around my neck, and tried to pull me in for a kiss, but we were both chuckling too hard and he had to settle for just kind of rubbing his head against mine. 'We're getting better,' he said and it just made me laugh all the more.

'I've been stewing about it to for ages,' I heard myself say, though it was a bit more confessional than I'd been intending.

'Why didn't you...?' Heero began, but I just shrugged.

'I didn't want you to feel obligated to invite me if... you know...' I said, not quite wanting to convey that sense of outsidership that I felt sometimes; that would definitely be venturing into a realm of confessionalism that I wasn't interested in sharing.

Heero sort of lost all the mirth then, getting kind of still and looking at me intently, his hand resting on the back of my neck. 'There is no aspect of my life that I don't want you a part of,' he told me softly.

Sort of made me feel all warm, and sort of made me feel like a dumbass, so I just kissed him to keep from having to answer.

And the next thing we knew we were running late, and had to dash out the door for our dinner date.

I could have wished for a quieter place to meet Toria and Hayden for dinner, because McMurphy's place on a Friday night was likely to be packed, but they were on a schedule, and Toria had given me my marching orders without consulting my hamsters, beasts and personal issues.

McMurphy's, I suspect, was going to be a deep-breath sort of place for... well, probably for the rest of my life. Unless my on-again/off-again shrink found a cure for the heartbreak of vacuum phobia and I somehow found myself in the trade again. But even in the land of what-if, that would require that Heero quit being a Preventer and take up as

my co-pilot, and since I just couldn't envision *that* even in the fantasy version where we got to be pirates... yeah. Walking through the door of McMurphy's spacer bar and grill was going to forever be... somewhat awkward.

Though, making our way across that parking lot, I had to admit to myself, if to nobody else... at least I didn't feel nauseous this time. Sometimes you take your improvements where you could get them.

So I took that deep-breath and opened the door, and tried to look on the bright side... I wasn't walking into a wake.

The place wasn't as packed as I've seen it, probably wasn't even as packed as it had been at Jock's send off, but there was still a bit of a crowd. Jess was right there to welcome us, but didn't offer to lead us to a table.

'Duo!' she greeted warmly, giving me a big smile. 'Go on around; Haydan and Toria are already waiting.'

'Thanks, dear-heart,' I told her as she breezed by balancing a tray, and I led the way down the length of the bar, reaching out to tap fists with McMurphy as we went by.

'Hey Mac,' I grinned and he mock aimed his water nozzle at me, since it was in his hand.

'Hey stranger,' he replied, and went right on mixing his drinks.

About then Toria must have spotted us, because I suddenly heard her voice, loud enough to be heard clear in the back room; 'Maxwell, you louse! Where have you been... you promised to give me *children!*' There were a good number of snickers from those who knew us, though the couple at the next table over, looked a little bit shocked.

If Heero hadn't been at my elbow, I'd have probably bellowed something extremely crude about Hayden, but as it stood... there was a tiny bit of embarrassment involved.

'Kids Are Us was sold out!' was the best I could manage, but then I found myself enveloped in one of Toria's killer hugs and it didn't matter anyway. Woman is delighted by our height difference and loves to, somewhat literally, rub my face in it.

'Torie honey,' Hayden told her in that long suffering tone of voice, 'let the man breathe,' even as he was rising to share a handshake with Heero.

'Oh, how cute!' Toria gushed, letting me go, 'you brought Grumpy!'

'Play nice, Spacer girl' I warned her, but a glance at the table told me they'd been there long enough that she'd already downed a few beers. Nice wasn't likely to happen. Even if she wasn't drunk, and I knew she wouldn't get too sloshed since they were shipping back out the next morning, she'd use it as an excuse to say whatever the hell crossed her mind. Not that, to be honest, she ever really bothered with excuses.

'I always play nice...' she grinned at me. 'When I'm playing.'

I tried not to sigh, since it just tends to encourage her. Hayden tugged her back into her seat just as Jess came by to find out what we were drinking. We placed our order and when we settled at the table, I made sure that Heero wasn't sitting next to Toria. No sense inviting trouble.

'So this ship of yours,' I jumped in, hoping to reroute the conversation to safer ground, 'you seriously named it *Buddy's Gift?*'

'Well, we did,' Toria drawled, kicking her chair back on two legs and rocking back and forth while she grinned at me. 'But then we renamed it to *Asshole Who Never Gets In Touch*. It seemed a better fit.'

Hayden just shook his head sadly, adding, 'It was a pain getting that pushed through... there're length limits, you know.'

'As if,' I snorted, though there was a tiny part of me hoping they weren't serious.

'Guess you'll have to come and see it to know for sure,' Toria smirked at me, just daring me to doubt her refined sense of inappropriateness.

'Well, you need to dock for more than twelve hours and I will,' I returned, but that brought the chair down with a faint thump, as she leaned in with a predatory gleam in her eye.

'You just need to come with us for a joy ride,' she said, and it had the feel of a line she'd been looking for an opening to deliver.

I had a moment where, at least in my head, my mouth gaped open, but Jess appeared at Heero's elbow with our drinks, and broke the thread of conversation.

'Here we go, ladies and gentlemen,' she smiled as she set the drinks around, 'two more beers, a green tea, and a Mt. Dew. You ready to order dinner, or you just going to sit and gab?'

Toria was eyeing our drinks, and I would have felt apprehensive over the ribbing I was about to get, if I wasn't slightly relieved that it seemed to have derailed her earlier observation.

'I, for one, am starved!' I jumped in, gamely going for distraction. 'Let me have the top sirloin with a salad.'

Heero followed right on my heels with his own order, and I think he was aware of the dance I was doing. I spared him a smile, and he gave me a look that hinted at a roll of the eyes.

I was all set with my next line when Jess left the table, but before I could deliver it, Hayden slipped smoothly into the opening. Blindsiding me at a completely different angle. 'So... we got a note from Lena about your show. She said it seemed to go well?'

'What?' I blinked, staring at him, not sure if I wanted to be creeped out by the fact that they were still in contact with Relena, or creeped out that the good Princess had obviously been talking about me.

'Well it's good that *somebody* keeps us updated,' Toria informed me with an evil smirk. 'Since the artist himself is apparently too damn important now to tell his old friends little details like that.'

'I'm sorry...' I blurted, my guilt providing me with all the 1x14 reasons I ought to be apologizing to them, before my brain informed me there was no way in hell they could know that they'd been *in* that show. I... hoped.

'You certainly should be sorry,' Toria began, but then gave me a shrewd kind of look. 'Wait... why are you apologizing? That wasn't the right kind of apology. That was a panic kind of apology. That was a... a...'

'Drank the last of the beer kind of apology?' Hayden supplied helpfully, giving me that same calculating look.

If I'd been in a cartoon, I would have grinned toothily and exited stage right to the bathroom or something. But that would have left Heero alone with the wolves. And you don't abandon your wingman to the wolves.

Unless you wanted to come back from the bathroom to a barroom brawl.

Though... a brawl would probably derail the latest topic, I suppose.

I never have a hedgehog when I actually need one.

‘Look, guys...’ I said, and hoped I didn’t sound like I was whining. I hate to whine. Even though I seem to do it a lot. I was still formulating just what it was they should look ‘at’ when the salads arrived. I greeted Jess, and the food, with probably a bit too much enthusiasm.

‘Looks great, Jess!’ I gushed, just as though she’d grown the lettuce herself. ‘Thanks!’

For her part, she just gave my glass of untouched soda a glance, as though wondering about my caffeine level. ‘Welcome?’ she replied, maybe leery of some practical joke coming her way, and went back to work.

Heero and I bent to sorting our salads out... he took my tomatoes while I fished his onions into my bowl. It bought me a moment for reflection, and I’d just about made up my mind that I needed to come clean, when Toria headed down an entirely different path.

‘Ew,’ she informed nobody in particular, ‘that is disgustingly coupley.’

Heero and I kind of froze. He turned his focus toward me, but I found myself glancing around a little bit apprehensively. Not exactly like the last few months had left much of me in the closet, but I still get a little nervous waving banners in public places. The only people within earshot were the couple who’d seemed a little bit taken aback by the idea of buying kids in bulk. They were currently deep in a conversation that required moving items around their table like a siege reenactment though, and didn’t seem to be paying us much attention.

‘Victoria,’ I heard Heero say in his quiet voice. The voice that wasn’t quiet so much as it was... contained. ‘It’s not considered polite to assume gay people are out with their relationships without asking first.’

In the conversational arena it was rather like a splash of ice water. Though... sure as hell derailed any topic coming or going. I waited for the explosion, calculating its size by how long it seemed to be taking Toria to work up to it. Shocked the hell out of me when all she did was duck her head.

‘Oh.’ she said quietly. ‘I...I’m sorry. I didn’t even think about it.’

‘No harm done,’ Heero replied blandly, giving a pointed glance around, and we spent a moment with everybody noticing nobody noticing.

I suppose I need to just get over my unease with the whole thing, it never seemed to bother Heero all that much after all. But it just ran against any ‘blend in’ lesson I was ever taught, and usually just made my spine feel twitchy. Just easier not to advertize.

And then there was a longer moment while we all applied various flavors of salad dressing.

‘So the show did go well?’ Hayden finally ventured, and I couldn’t decide if he was really that curious or if he was just trying for a semi-safe conversation.

‘It did,’ I responded quickly, hoping we wouldn’t get back on that whole apology thing. ‘At least... it seemed to. People showed up. Shit sold. I guess that’s good.’

He snorted and shook his head. ‘I’m told that just getting in that place is supposed to be pretty impressive.’

I grinned across the table at him. ‘I heard that same thing,’ I quipped. ‘But they let *me* in, so there’s no real accounting for taste.’

‘It was impressive enough that it got you a commission from Jack Lee,’ Heero tossed in, being his usual helpful self. I was preparing a glare to send his way, as soon as

he looked up from his studious arrangement of his salad to receive it, but the comment drew Toria back into the conversation.

‘Jack Lee?’ she had to ask, voice hovering somewhere between incredulous and pissed. ‘*The* Jack Lee? Are you shitting me?’

I bit back on the automatic, but somewhat crude line that leaped to the tip of my tongue. ‘Uh... define ‘The?’’ I stalled instead.

‘Has more money than God, Jack Lee?’ she clarified, stabbing the air with her fork. ‘Mr. Anti-gravity? King of colony imports? Moves more goods in a week than the average ship owner hauls in their lives, Jack Lee?’

I blinked at her for a second and had to confess, ‘Uh... damned if I know what he does for a living. I thought he was just the art guy, Jack Lee.’

She and Hayden exchanged a look that was kind of odd, and I turned to Heero for some sort of clarification.

‘When Mr. Lee isn’t making your life miserable,’ he smiled, ‘he runs one of the biggest colony import/export businesses out there.’

‘And when I was picking Quatre’s brain for information on the guy,’ I huffed, ‘he didn’t think that was pertinent information?’

‘I imagine he didn’t think it was relative to what you were researching,’ Heero offered and since I didn’t have Quatre there, I had to accept it. I suppose, in the long run, what the guy did for a living really hadn’t mattered in respect to the commission. I took a second to fit the information into the framework of the new project and didn’t really see that it mattered there either, and let it go.

Beside me, Toria just looked like she wanted to beat her head on the table. ‘I hate you, Duo Maxwell,’ she grumbled. ‘I hate you, hate you, hate you.’

‘What’d I do?’ I exclaimed, I’d never taken Toria for a celebrity hound or some damn thing like that. She’d taken Relena Peacecraft in stride, after all.

‘Hello?’ she burst out, reaching out like she was going to smack me in the head, but somewhere between the drink delivery and the salad, she’d pulled her legs up to sit balanced on her chair cross-legged, and she couldn’t reach me without unbalancing. ‘Best friends here? Still in the freaking trade? You know... hauling shit for a living?’

I just sat and blinked at her, trying to follow her mental jumping around and wondering if maybe she’d had more beers than I’d thought. ‘Uh... yeah?’

She made a frustrated little sound and turned to Hayden. ‘Can I kill him? Can I, please?’

He reached out and gave her a sympathetic pat on the back, ‘No, sweetie... he may be dense, but he still has his uses.’

They couldn’t possibly be pissed at me for name dropping, I hadn’t been the one to drop the name. That thought reminded me that I owed Heero a glare, but when I turned to impart it, he was smiling at me bemusedly. ‘I think Victoria is a little envious of your connections, Duo,’ he explained and I was a bit embarrassed to feel the light bulb go off in my head.

Wow. Connections. I keep forgetting that I have connections. It wasn’t something that I would exploit for myself, but... wow. I tried to imagine myself approaching Jack Lee and asking him if maybe he needed to add the services of an independent cargo ship, and I felt the heat wanting to rise to my face.

‘But...’ I hedged while the blush faded and the Jack Lee in my head stopped laughing at my impudence, ‘what are you doing now? I thought you had a contract?’

‘We’re just working job to job at the moment,’ Hayden said, losing the teasing tone. ‘We’re doing ok; making all our payments, but something more long term would be... really nice.’

‘Nice,’ Toria snorted, and gave Hayden a roll of her eyes that just made the big guy grin.

‘Well, you can’t be pissed at me,’ I reasoned. ‘I just freaking found out the man was even in the business!’

‘You’re forgiven,’ Toria offered magnanimously. ‘We’ll be back through again month after. We can wait until then for you to find something out.’

Had I been eating, I might have choked on it.

‘I’ll... see what I can do,’ I finally managed, and they both beamed at me, just as though I’d already handed them a job. I was still waiting for the hysterical laughter of the virtual Mr. Lee to stop echoing in my head.

‘Jess!’ Toria called out happily, waving the woman over. ‘We need a bottle of champagne!’

‘You never drank champagne in your life, Brannigan!’ Jess called back from three tables over, and it made Toria laugh so hard I thought she was going to fall out of her chair.

‘You’re right!’ she hollered, and I winced, glancing around to judge how much we were annoying other people. ‘Make it a bottle of whiskey!’

‘Uh... don’t forget you have to be able to pilot in less than twelve hours,’ I muttered, trying not to meet the curious stares coming from the salt and pepper siege couple. Since I’d last looked, the salt had out maneuvered the pepper and there was a barricade of flatware between the remains of what looked like a very odd pizza. Who put pineapple on pizza? I smiled sheepishly and turned back to my salad.

‘You’re killing my joy, buddy-boy,’ Toria grumbled. ‘When did you become such a party-poop?’ She dinged her fork off my glass of soda and I picked it up to make sure she didn’t spill it, taking a couple of big swallows defiantly.

‘I would not poop on your joy,’ I zinged back, stabbing at my salad and just trying to avoid the whole potential situation.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her shift as she unwound from her perch and put her feet back on the floor, I sighed to myself; would have been nice if I hadn’t had to have the whole weird alcohol conversation I could feel coming on.

‘I can drive home, if you’d like,’ Heero suddenly offered into the middle of the weird, and I glanced up at him.

‘Nah,’ I said, with a wry grin. ‘I don’t much want to be painting the kitchen with a hang-over.’

I turned back to my salad and caught the strangest look on Toria’s face. She started to say something, but Jess interrupted again, bringing the rest of our meal to the table. ‘So what’d you settle on Toria?’ she asked. ‘Champagne? Whiskey? Rum?’

‘Oh, never mind,’ Toria told her with an odd tone. ‘I’ll save it until this asshole actually comes through.’

Jess laughed and tugged on my braid as she left. ‘Oh, you know Duo always does what he says he will,’ she said, even though she couldn’t have even known what we were

talking about. Toria didn't seem to be paying any attention though, she was just regarding Heero with an expression I would have called calculating. While she was distracted, I decided to try to steer the conversation back to safer ground.

'So just what's the job you guys are on, anyway?' I asked Hayden and he looked up from his dinner with some relief. I was feeling kind of sorry for the guy; he kept getting caught in the middle of the awkward.

'We stuck with running cargo,' he told me around a mouthful of whatever he was eating. 'Salvage work is just too lean, unless you're an operation big enough to compete with the Sweepers. Or,' he amended with a twinkle in his eye, 'suicidal.'

'Hey,' I grinned, 'you go where the money is.'

He ignored me and went on. 'We've managed to score two runs this month for one of the big corporations moving building supplies out to L3. We're kind of hoping to get picked up on retainer.'

I digested that, looking for any hint that they weren't being completely forthcoming. I'd been pretty appalled when I'd discovered that they'd run things so close to the bone last time, without telling me. 'But you're doing ok?'

'Insurance all paid up and current,' Toria said dryly. 'And the bank only owns about half our ship.'

I tucked into my steak so I didn't have to meet the look that I expected was on her face. I hadn't meant to sound like I was checking up on them like some meddling busy-body uncle or something.

'We're fine,' Hayden chuckled, just as though Toria hadn't spoken. 'We've even banked enough to cover a couple of months in case we have some down-time. Would just be nice if we didn't have any down-time.'

I could remember those days of lining jobs up and trying to make sure you didn't have any long gaps with nothing on the schedule. Owning a ship isn't like owning a house... ships don't just sit there doing nothing if you aren't running a job. It still cost you in fuel or docking fees in between. Any time you weren't working, your ship was chewing away at your savings like a mouse in the grain... nibble, nibble, nibble.

'We're running lumber to L3 this week and then making the L4 loop,' Toria suddenly said, and it was the predatory cock to her head that warned me we were headed for another topic I probably wasn't going to be happy with. 'But then we'll be back through for a turn-around job. Just be off dirt-side for a couple of days. You should come with us and you can paint my babies.'

Or... back around to an already avoided topic. Ouch. Probably the worst one. I'd rather she'd bounced back to why I owed them an apology over an art gallery showing.

I had a bite of steak in my mouth and just focused on chewing it, trying to think of something that would throw her off track without actually having to get all dramatic about it. It had been days since I'd had any major drama and I rather liked the trend.

George appeared on one side of my plate, shuffling between a 'fuck off' and an 'oh shit' banner, but Francis appeared on the other with one of those red circle 'no' banners... but I couldn't tell what he was advocating against. No melodrama? No wank? No arguing? No whining? None of the above?

I reflected, as they tussled through the dregs of my salad, that the little rodents really weren't all that helpful most of the time. The thought made them vanish in a huff.

I was trying to decide if I would get further with Toria by teasing, or by making puppy eyes at her, when Heero took the decision out of my hands. Guess he'd gotten pushed too far.

'I think,' he said very carefully, 'that you are crossing the line here. We're all very aware of why that would be a... bad idea. Duo can work on your paintings while you're docked. He doesn't need...'

'Maybe he *does* need,' Toria said, cutting him off and glaring at him coldly. 'Maybe he needs to get back out there. The Duo Maxwell *I* know wouldn't let this thing beat him.'

Heero was instantly a very unhappy boy. I feared for the fork he had in his hand. His mouth was opening and I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was about to nuke the playing field. I reached out and touched his hand, buying his restraint.

'Whoa there, guys,' I chided. 'Let's not be throwing the cutlery here... it just pisses McMurphy off.'

There was a weird moment where they tried to glare each other down, and I wanted to wave my hand between them to see if I could actually feel some heat or electricity or something, because it sure seemed like it was there.

'So...' Hayden tossed out into the moment, 'anybody want dessert?' but it fell flat and everybody ignored him.

I tried to poke at Toria's notion, tried to slip the idea on for size, but just needed more than the moment between conversational lines. I needed to get past the initial hit to the blood pressure to really contemplate it. 'Lemme think about it,' I blurted, and it brought Heero's attention around to me. He opened his mouth to speak, but then thought better of it, just turning his hand under mine to squeeze my fingers for a moment.

'I think I want dessert,' Hayden continued, ignoring our ignoring him. 'What do you think? The chocolate cake or that apple thing?'

'Oh, I love the apple thing!' Toria gushed, dropping the whole issue in my lap just like that, and moving on. I watched them for a second, as they perused the dessert menu, and wondered if that had been her backing down from Heero, or her accepting my word that I would seriously consider her request.

Or her confidence that I couldn't say no to her.

I had one of those moments where I stepped outside and watched the world go by. Like it all had nothing to do with me. There was a drone around us, the conversations of dozens of other people making a background noise where words surfaced now and again. Somewhere across the room, somebody laughed loudly. Somebody else was calling for another round of drinks. The television over the bar was playing some obnoxious commercial jingle. I heard somebody call out 'Cut across, shorty!' and knew the joke being told. The couple behind us had left off arranging condiments and I heard a snippet of something that had to do with Jedi Knights and pirates.

It made me want to turn around and join *their* conversation. It sounded much more entertaining than my own.

And that thought gave me a pang of melancholy regret that I couldn't quite get my head around.

It was good to see my friends again, I wouldn't try to deny that. But the whole dinner had been more like a chess match than a normal conversation. So many topics that were just plain awkward. So many things that weren't comfortable to talk about. Suppose

I couldn't really blame anybody but myself... I was the one with all the excess baggage after all.

There was a touch on the back of my hand and I gave Heero a reassuring smile to let him know I wasn't completely off in la-la land. His return smile held a hint of understanding.

'You've changed, Buddy-boy,' Toria suddenly said and I looked over to find her gazing at me with a sad sort of look in her eyes.

'I'm sorry,' I told her, because I kind of was. 'But... it's not really surprising, is it? After everything that's happened?'

She just shook her head and stared at me for another long moment before turning back to the dessert menu. 'The apple thing,' she decided firmly. 'But you get your own, Hayden Brannigan because I'm not sharing!'

I could feel Heero watching me, so I turned to him and smiled, 'You want to try one of these apple what'sits?'

He snorted and then shrugged, letting me know his focus was elsewhere, but there wasn't much he could do about it in the middle of a crowded bar. Made me wonder if I shouldn't have just let him stay at home; he couldn't be getting much out of the evening beyond a decent meal and a headache. At least I could say I'd gotten to see some old friends.

I became aware that there was some couple communication going on across the table too, though after a minute Toria huffed in a way that was communicated quite well beyond the couple, and then she excused herself to the restroom with an air that felt a lot like she was taking a breather so she didn't deck Hayden. Or Heero. Or maybe me.

Hayden sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, smiling sheepishly across at us. 'I'm really sorry...' he began, but I just waved it away.

'Nobody's fault, buddy-boy,' I told him. 'It's just going to be... awkward for awhile. I'm probably not trying hard enough to be... normal?' It was as close as I could manage to what I was thinking, but it just made Heero frown and I sighed too. 'You know what I mean?'

I think Heero wanted to say something, but didn't, and Hayden filled the pause with his own observation, not noticing that Heero was working on words. 'As adaptable as Torie is, she's having a hard time with things changing like this,' he said. 'She's half convinced that... well... that you're not dirt-side by choice, you know?'

'Do I look locked up?' I chuckled, remembering a couple of Toria's emails. 'You're not seriously telling me she thinks that?'

'What?' Heero wanted to know, looking from one of us to the other in shock. Hayden and I shared a laugh.

'My wife has a somewhat over active imagination,' Hayden confessed, as though it was a big secret. 'And sometimes she over thinks things and makes some... interesting leaps of logic.'

'Where have I seen that before?' Heero said wryly, and I kicked half-heartedly at his foot, but just bumped his chair.

'I'm not quite *that* bad!' I informed them, but neither of them looked convinced. I dropped it, since there was no telling how long before Toria came back from the bathroom. 'Seriously, Hayden... what the hell is her problem with Heero? She doesn't really think that he's got me... whatever the hell she thinks?'

He took a long swallow of his beer and set the empty bottle down, obviously collecting his thoughts. 'All Torie is seeing are the changes in you, Duo... and for some damn reason, she can't seem to accept that there isn't somebody to blame.'

'There is;' I drawled, '*me*. But that's beside the point. What the hell's it going to take to make her get off Heero's case?'

'Time,' he said, smiling that smile he has that can make him look twice his age, and twice as smart. 'Heero's already thrown her a little tonight. Give her time and she'll come around.'

'Before or after she poisons my tea?' Heero muttered, but I don't think Hayden caught it.

I glanced toward the bathrooms, but didn't see her coming back yet. 'Should I... should I maybe talk to her alone or something?'

'Not if she's just going to use the time to pressure you,' Heero growled, and I kind of wish Hayden hadn't caught that line either.

'I'm really sorry about that,' Hayden said, ducking his head and fiddling with his silverware. 'You have to realize she's ship-born, she just flat can't understand... well... you know.'

'Vacuum phobia?' I supplied for him and he nodded guiltily. Hayden himself is a transplanted ground-bounder and I'm sure he had an entirely different perspective on the topic.

'I can understand that,' I told him, and found myself reaching across the table for one of their empty beer bottles since my glass of soda didn't have a label on it. 'Hell... it wasn't something I was particularly understanding about myself, until I found myself living with it.'

It made me wonder if Toria would have come out of the asteroid belt with a more intact psyche. Made me feel like a wimp because I hadn't. Maybe I *had* given up too soon? Maybe I should have tried again. And again, until I'd just gotten the hell over it, like Toria seemed to think I would.

'Maybe I didn't try hard enough,' I heard myself say and knew it was a mistake before the words were quite out of my mouth.

'If you'd tried any harder,' Heero rumbled, his voice thick with emotion he wouldn't quite let out in the middle of a crowded restaurant, 'you wouldn't damn well be here.'

'Heero...' I began, looking for something that would soothe, but he just shook his head and let it go. Hayden cleared his throat uncomfortably.

'You know Torie,' he said with a strangely affectionate smile, 'Never met a fear that shouldn't be steam rolled over.' The remark came with an odd glance in Heero's direction, and it made me want to jump up and declare that I'd known it all along, but I refrained. I just gave him a snort of a laugh that went a little more self-deprecating than I'd intended.

'I'll try to be less wimp-like in her presence,' I promised, but it didn't win me a laugh from anybody at the table. I sighed and thought again that I'd rather join the debate on pirates versus ninjas that was going on behind us.

From Heero, all I was getting was a mounting frustration, but Hayden just seemed like he was bordering on depressed. It made me want to pull at my hair, or maybe smack

around my repress hamster. Damn thing never seemed to be around when I really needed him the most.

Francis popped into the middle of my plate, waved his earlier red anti banner at me rather pointedly, then scowled and flipped me off before vanishing back to wherever thought hamsters go when they're off stage. I sighed.

'You guys are a tough damn crowd,' I muttered, and settled for rubbing a hand over my face.

'You know,' Hayden mused, not really paying any attention to me, his thoughts turned inward to whatever was playing out behind unfocused eyes, 'I think some of it's guilt.'

I'd learned my lesson about rushing into apologies before one has heard all the details, so I just waited for him to finish the thought before deciding what I should be apologizing for. Surprised me where the thought ended up going.

'It took her months to stop obsessing over asking you to compete in the expo,' he explained, and then gave me a quirk of a grin. 'You scared the holy crap out of her when she realized you really passed out.'

'I thought we went over that,' I grumbled, embarrassed and hoping we weren't going to get into that crap again. It hadn't been my finest moment.

'Well,' he chuckled and I couldn't help notice that he was keeping his eyes somewhat averted from Heero's general direction, 'you didn't go over it so much as you dismissed it. Didn't stop her from...'

Obsessing, I assumed, but I would never know, because we noticed Toria coming back across the room, and he dropped it. She arrived back at our table in rendezvous with our desserts and the conversation turned to apples and ice cream and why things that are not good for you taste so damn good.

Somehow the entire table had come to some unspoken resolution to play nice after all, and the conversation from that point on revolved around our new house and their new ship. Various jobs and hobbies on both sides. The latest issue of the Hell Bound Beavers. Stuff that friends talk about when they aren't really talking about anything important. Or sensitive. Or likely to cause a scene.

Behind us, the pirate couple paid their bill and rose to leave, donning a pair of the strangest knit caps I'd ever seen. It made me realize just how long we'd been sitting there and I traded a look with Heero that Toria misread and she snickered, nudging me under the table while giving the couple a thumbs up.

'Popular culture, Buddy-boy,' she said. 'You wouldn't get it.'

'And you're not going to explain it, I suppose,' I replied, though I hardly had to.

'Inside jokes aren't funny if you have to explain them,' she said, pretty much as expected.

Hayden said something teasing, giving her a hard time about just how fine the line is between 'geek' and 'dork' and they bantered for a bit, but somehow I could feel the evening was winding down. I just couldn't decide if I was sorry for that, or relieved.

Toria seemed to sense that the party was over about the same time, and all of a sudden had some kind of fit that required her to windmill her arms and go 'Oh! Oh! Wait!' several times.

She about fell out of her chair trying to lean over and dig around under the table while not completely unwinding herself from her typical... unconventional sitting

position. Hayden reached out, almost unconsciously, and steadied her chair until she came up again. I wasn't quite sure what to make of the gift-wrapped boxes she was brandishing. She rolled her eyes at our confused expressions and huffed, 'House warming presents! Duh!'

'You guys didn't need to do that...' I began, and felt a pang of vague guilt that I hadn't thought to get something for them in return. A Spacer's ship is their home, after all.

Hayden waved aside my objections with a smile that was almost embarrassed, and I knew without doubt just who had picked out whatever was in the packages. I hesitated, not sure of the etiquette... open now, or open later? Remembering what I'd gotten from Toria when I'd bought my own Demon, I wasn't sure I even wanted to open them in a public place.

'Take them home,' she told us, and it made Heero raise an eyebrow.

'So there won't be any witnesses when they blow up?' he said dryly, but I wasn't at all sure he was kidding.

Toria just smiled her cold raptor smile and said, 'Just yours.'

Heero snorted and couldn't help glancing down at the innocent, brightly wrapped box with the over-sized bow. I could tell it pleased Toria that she'd maybe made him nervous.

And then we were down to the hugging and the back-slapping and the paying of the bills. Hayden was staying close to Toria, and she only managed to work in one pointed, 'I'll be waiting to hear from you,' before we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways.

Heero ended up driving home anyway, because while I hadn't been drinking, I still felt supremely distracted. I think he managed to contain himself for three blocks before he finally had to ask, 'Are you serious? Toria thinks I've... kidnapped you or something?'

It felt good to laugh without all the awkwardness. 'More like... brain washed or something, I suspect,' I told him, not really even sure what her thought processes were.

'That takes more than just an over-active imagination...' he muttered.

'I think it probably takes a powerful will to justify her... uh... dislike of you,' I said, and got a snort that might have been agreement.

'She doesn't strike me as the type who bothers to justify much of anything.'

'Not to anybody else,' I grinned, 'but to herself? Yeah.'

He just drove in silence while he thought about that one for a bit, finally dismissing the topic as just too weird. 'I suppose she'll get over it eventually.'

'She better,' I chuckled, 'because I'm kind of attached to you.'

It made him smile, but it was in a tired sort of way. 'You know I wouldn't ask you to choose...'

'I know,' I interrupted, seeing where he was going with the comment. 'But eventually this crap is going to stop being amusing.'

'Eventually?' he said, and I didn't even have to see the raised eyebrow to know it was there.

I managed a dry little chuckle, and didn't actually admit he was right... it had gotten unamusing a long time ago. 'I'm really sorry about the evening,' I told him

instead. 'I wouldn't have dragged you along if I'd known things were going to end up that... uncomfortable.'

'I was glad I was there,' he said, and again, I didn't need to look to see the frown. 'I suspect it toned her down a little.'

I suspected he was right, though that thought just left me wondering how bad things would have gotten. Would she have actually ranted about Heero's hold on me? LECTURED me about 'getting back on the horse'? Hauled me off to L3 with them?

'Well,' I chuckled darkly, 'as dumb as it sounds to say about a dinner date... I'm glad you were there to back me up.'

We refrained from carrying the conversation any further, because there just wasn't much else to say on the topic that wasn't going to end up in a rant. As annoying as Toria can be, I love her like a sister, and I think Heero realized there was a line there that could be crossed if he started bitching too much. Not that I could have found the damn line right then, but I'm sure it was there somewhere.

The notion of sister types gave me pause though, and I had to cast a guilty glance in Heero's direction, thinking about my own relationship with Relena. I resolved to try to dial back on sharing my uncensored thoughts concerning the good Princess.

The rest of the drive was quietly companionable, while we thought our own thoughts on the weird evening, but refrained from beating the dead horse. Eventually, I was sure we'd end up having a talk about Toria's little proposition, but I needed to have some time to think about it first, and I think Heero just flat didn't want to risk getting my stubborn streak going by bringing it up first. For the moment, I'd set the idea off to the side, not quite ready to turn it into a real possibility by delving into it too deeply. I had a kitchen to get painted and a commission that I needed to be thinking about.

In fact, there was an information packet waiting for me when we got home, and when we finally got there, I bit the bullet and stopped avoiding it.

It was mostly just pages and pages on technical aspects that I never would have thought about. Sizes and weights and transportability. In the grand scheme of things, most of it probably wasn't going to impact my part in the project. It was going to be somebody else's problem, the way I understood it, to translate my idea into actual form. The part that was intended to be helpful, but I couldn't say actually was, was the 'mission statement'. Funding, apparently, was coming from some non-profit group and I had to read their blurb more than once.

'Our goal is to create a monument to the great sacrifice of the scholars and elders of the L5 colony A0200. We wish to honor their bravery and acknowledge their great contribution to ending the war of 195. We want to bring an embodiment of the spirit of the people of L5 to the people of the Earth Sphere. To foster an understanding of the power of free choice when combined with a code of honor and justice.'

A lot of pretty words, but it didn't exactly coalesce my waffling feelings into something solid.

'That's... a tall order,' Heero ventured, leaning over to read it with me.

'No shit,' I muttered, going over it for the third time and then flipping the paper to see if there was more, but that was pretty much it. No more than ten feet tall, less than a ton and embody all the ethical values of an entire people. No problem. You want fries with that?

I only knew one person from L5 and when that thought occurred to me, I damn near tripped over my first stumbling block.

‘You going to do it?’ Heero asked about that time, and I sat back with a gust of a sigh, surrendering the paper to him and sinking into the couch cushions.

‘I... gotta talk to Wufei,’ I said, telling myself in the same breath as telling Heero. No way could I even decide until I knew his thoughts on the whole damn thing. What if the very idea appalled him? I remembered my vague feelings of... almost disdain when I’d heard about the memorial to the Maxwell church. Though I suppose most of that had been because the money would have been better spent on improvements to the community, not on a big-ass rock. Wasn’t exactly anything left to improve when it came to L5. Might that make it less something to be disdainful about?

Or maybe Wufei would just rather forget the whole thing?

‘Oh God,’ I groaned, really thinking about it. ‘How in the hell am I even going to bring a topic like this up?’

Heero settled into the cushions with me, dropping an arm around me at the same time he dropped the paperwork into my lap.

‘It’s not something he talks about a lot,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘But he *has* talked about it before. It’s not like a completely taboo subject.’

‘But it’s gotta be painful,’ I sighed, thinking about how badly I hated talking about certain aspects of my own past. The destruction of L5 had to be like Maxwell Church, times... a million. How the hell would I even start a conversation like that? ‘You think he even knows that they’re planning some kind of anniversary thing?’

‘He’s not mentioned it,’ Heero said, pulling me in closer, and I sighed and leaned my head against him. ‘Though he keeps his eye on the news feeds.’

Kind of like I sometimes morbidly searched for references to L2 during certain historical periods of the not so distant past. It would sure as hell help if he at least had a clue.

‘Would you like me to talk to him?’ Heero offered. ‘I could at least tell him about the memorial...’

‘No time,’ I sighed. ‘I have to let them know by Monday if I’m going to take the job or not.’

And wow, didn’t ‘job’ seem like not the right word? Job sounded so... mundane. So simple. A paint job, a clerical job, a scut job. This wasn’t a job, this was...

I didn’t even know, but way bigger than a simple job.

‘For what it’s worth,’ Heero said, sounding unsure about voicing his thoughts. ‘I think you should do it.’

‘I think...’ I said, working it out in my head, ‘I think that’s going to be entirely up to Wufei.’

Or was that just being a chicken-shit? Trying to make it somebody else’s decision?

‘I’m not so sure...’ Heero began, possibly agreeing with my chicken-shit assessment, but being far too polite to just come out and say so.

‘Well,’ I cut in, saving him the hunt for wording. ‘Either way, I have to at least talk to him first.’

And having a full day planned for Saturday already, we left it at that and took ourselves off to bed.

The former owner of our house had been something of a self-proclaimed, and likely self-taught, Mr. Fixit. If I could believe the neighbors, Les had been a heck of a great guy of the 'shirt off his back' variety. He had not, however, been a master decorator/carpenter/plumber. His knowledge of certain standards, like the hot water goes on the left, was... lacking. Sometimes we found evidence of little repair jobs that were kind of inspired, and sometimes I was left wondering if the guy's wife had just shaken her head fondly, or if they'd fought over his... lack of concern for esthetics.

The kitchen, I suspect, had been the guy's grand, big project. And all I can really say about it was it had damn near been the deal breaker for Heero when we'd bought the house. I'd had to swear on a stack of Beaver comics that a full remodel would be our own first big project.

There were four doorways in that room, one leading into the front dining room, one opening into the living room, one on that same wall leading into the hall to the back of the house, and then the basement door. We were rather shocked to discover, once our crew began tearing things apart, that there had at one time been a fifth. An outside door directly across from the basement door. It made us feel a little better about our decision to close off the hall entrance, since we obviously weren't the first ones to make that kind of major structural change. It also explained the weird stone block outside the house on that side. I'd always thought it looked like a misplaced step; turns out it wasn't as misplaced as it had appeared.

The room had been a monument to inconvenience, and a horrible combination of white and yellow that had probably once been bright and sunny and trendy, but hadn't aged well. The white had gone dingy and the yellow sort of putrid, and I'd never been a huge fan of that pre-colony retro look anyway. Though... I found I kind of missed the silly little decals. Not that I would ever say that out loud to Heero. Or anybody else, for that matter.

After the initial 'holy shit' moment, the tear-out had almost been kind of fun to watch happen. The doodles on the inside of the drywall where Les and Tricie had closed off the mystery door, for instance, had been like finding a treasure. Heero didn't know I'd squirreled away one of the bigger pieces in my studio, though he did notice me staring contemplatively at other random walls, wondering what might be behind them. I couldn't quite decide if my curiosity amused him, or made him nervous.

The next part, the building back up part, had been way less entertaining. It had been, in a word... slow. So while I couldn't say that I was wildly excited to be spending my day off slathering paint all over my newly dry-walled kitchen, I was a little bit excited to be making progress. Our doing the job ourselves would move the schedule up a good two or three days. And since we were already a week or two *behind* schedule, every day trimmed off was a good thing.

The guys from the home improvement store were all nice enough, but I was a little bit tired of them being in my house.

Having already repainted the master bedroom, I knew one end of a paint roller from the other and Heero, despite his protests, turned out to be as precise with his taping as he was with anything else he turned his hand too. We settled in to a system pretty easily that morning, him masking and doing the trim work, and me rolling the big stuff. I hadn't really made up my mind if I wanted to do any embellishment in the kitchen, but

we had decided to leave it until after all the rest of the work was out of the way. The current goal was to just, as they say, get her done.

Not that painting is exactly what you'd call a hard job. Tedious, maybe. Time consuming. Mind-numbing, even. But not really all that hard. Might have helped if it actually was a job that took more effort, because it might have kept the hamsters in my head from spending the day running on the wheel. Little varmints were just having a field day with Aleyah's latest assignment.

Assignment. Commission. L5. Wufei. Aleyah. Suicide. Kaboom. War. Peace. Brain oil.

Uh... the hamster wheel kind of squeaks.

Part of my head wanted to put the whole commission thing on hold until I'd talked to Wufei, but there was another part that was quietly trying to do design work while I wasn't looking. Just how in the hell did you embody in one sculpture something that tragic? There were certainly enough symbols in the world for 'peace'. Olive branches? Doves? Peace signs? In the realm of make love, not war... I suppose you had to count the suicide of L5 right up there at the top. Talk about your refusal to play the game. What did the ultimate in peace gestures call for? An entire olive tree? Full of white doves? With peace signs carved on the trunk? Maybe some paper cranes hanging all over it?

Ok, maybe that was a bit much.

Was the olive tree itself a bad idea? I liked trees. Trees were cool. Symbolism was good, right? I mean... just making a sculptural likeness of the colony would be lame. It wasn't about the colony anyway; it was about the people. It needed to be humanized. We're all human... ground bounders, spacers, trade, and not. Wasn't that the point to the whole thing? Part of the point? It was about the people of L5. Wasn't there an elder? Some sort of leader? There had to have been... you don't just come to that kind of decision by popular vote. There had to be somebody calling the shots and making the plans. Somebody to throw the switch. Maybe that should be the subject of the piece?

Though I kinda liked the tree idea. If an olive branch was a peace offering, did the whole tree mean the same? Or...

'Duo... what the heck are you doing?'

I blinked at the wall in front of me, surprised as all hell to find something that kind of resembled a tree. Done with the broad strokes of a paint roller. Apparently, if you sort of drag the roller sideways, you can get something of a narrowish line. Who knew?

'Would you believe me if I told you this is a new paint saving technique?' I tried, and it made Heero burst out with a laugh that I don't think he'd intended.

I turned away from the mess I'd made and found him standing in the middle of the kitchen, paint brush in hand, oddly adorable streak of pale green paint on his chin, and a slightly amused/confused expression on his face.

Why doesn't bemused mean amused/confused? It should, because there needs to be a word for that, and it sounds like it fits. Confused already means confused. Why can't bemused mean something else? There should be a place you can go to petition for changes like that.

I turned back to face the wall and sighed; damn thing was going to show through if I didn't brush it out pretty quickly.

‘Do I even want to know?’ Heero chuckled, coming over to stand next to me. ‘Or is this one of those things that will just leave me even more confused than when I first asked?’

‘I think when we’re done here,’ I confessed, ‘I really need to go see Wufei.’

It made Heero look harder at the wanna-be mural, and while the little crease of confusion on his forehead only deepened, I could see he sort of got what it was my sub-conscious was playing games with. Then the frown cleared away and I guess he decided it didn’t really matter just what I was working out in paint on the wall.

‘We’re well past half-way done,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you go ahead and I’ll finish up.’

‘I’d feel like a slacker,’ I grumbled, a little bit embarrassed by my inability to stay on-track.

‘Wufei had plans this evening with Sally,’ he informed me, giving my shoulder a nudge with his own. ‘If you don’t catch him before they take off, you won’t be able to talk to him until tomorrow.’

I couldn’t make up my mind if that was attractive or not; I still hadn’t worked up any sort of opening line...

‘So... about that whole death of your people thing...’

‘Did you know they’re planning on immortalizing the worst moment of your life?’

‘Just how did you feel about that mass, group suicide game plan?’

While I had faced up to the fact that the conversation needed to happen, I hadn’t yet figured out just how one went about it. When they’d put up the memorial on L2, nobody had felt the need to come and consult me on the subject one way or the other.

But standing there, staring at the mutant, roller-pad formed green tree thing, I couldn’t say the idea of sucking on the notions in my head for the rest of the day, without being able to actually know if there was a point or not, was all that attractive either.

‘Are you sure you don’t care?’ I heard myself ask, and Heero just kissed me on the temple, took the paint roller out of my hand, and smiled.

‘Go, already,’ he chuckled. ‘Before we have to do the whole kitchen over again, instead of just this wall.’

I vowed to myself to do more than my share of the work on the second coat, kissed Heero back, and went.

Wufei and Sally have a somewhat odd relationship, in my humble opinion. They’re together more often than not, grumble at each other like an old married couple half the time, appear to be each other’s ‘got your back’ person in all things social... but don’t seem to care to indulge in any sort of co-habitation.

Obviously, I’m not privy to what their arrangements are, but I did know that he had his place and she had hers, and they seemed more than happy to keep it that way. Though... maybe that had to do with Wufei’s cat. My understanding was that it used to be Sally’s cat. Maybe Beowulf just wouldn’t tolerate living with the woman who tried to name him Muffin? Muffy? Buffy? Whatever the hell it had been.

The drive over to Wufei’s place that day was one of those trips that felt both long and short. I was knocking on his apartment door long before I’d worked out just what in the hell I was going to say, and was just trusting that something non-offensive would come to mind. I wondered if my trepidation showed, and I tried to make it not, but when Wufei finally opened the door I got a funny little smile as he gestured me inside.

‘Relax,’ he told me almost before the hello part. ‘Heero called and warned me.’

‘He did?’ I said, though it felt like one of those lines you use when you don’t know what else to say. Like *you’re kidding*, or *you don’t say*. I couldn’t decide if I was grateful or felt like a child who needed Daddy to speak for him. But since I never had figured out how to broach the subject, I guess I *did* need help and I should be grateful for getting it. A little embarrassment over a phone call was nothing in the face of the embarrassment if some of the lines in my head actually found their way out.

It made Wufei chuckle but it was in a soft, odd kind of way, and he just waved me to follow him through the apartment. We didn’t say anything else for a moment and I wondered how long he’d had to digest the knowledge, because it sure seemed like he was still chewing on it pretty hard.

I’d caught him changing the oil on his motorcycle, and he led me out to his little patio where he had everything set up on a bed of spread newspaper.

I watched him squat down to finish the job of removing the drain plug, and blurted, ‘Did you know about it?’

‘No,’ he replied thoughtfully, his tone kind of making me think that maybe he was a little chagrined to admit that. Like he’d fallen down on the job of keeping up with current events. He spent a moment turning the drain plug in his fingers while the oil ran into the battered looking drain pan. There was a rag lying across the seat of the bike and I picked it up, holding my hand out.

‘You’re making a mess,’ I chided, letting him be the one to decide when we were going to talk about the other subject. He looked at the plug and his oil smeared fingers for a second before handing it over and letting me clean it. Of course, that just left him with nothing to do but watch the oil drain. So we did that while I polished every last smear of oil off that plug until it looked brand new, and he absently wiped his hands on his already stained jeans.

Standing over him, the angle and the sunlight gave me a good view of the remnants of the damage I’d done to his throat during my ‘incident’ with Simcoe and the Sons of Adam. The bruising faded to shades of green and yellow. It gave me something to brood on while he worked things out in his head. Never hurts to have multiple things on the table to feel guilty about at any given time.

‘Should have known it was going to happen sooner or later,’ he finally said, and I couldn’t help a snort.

‘Kind of a bitch, isn’t it?’ I commiserated. ‘I remember when I first laid eyes on the memorial on L2. I think I kicked it.’

It made him laugh, as the comment had been intended to, and he stood up then to dig around his tool box. ‘I kind of feel like kicking something... but I’m not even sure why.’

‘Because it sucked?’ I said and then winced at the line, but he nodded absently, taking the crack at face value, his attention on his tools.

‘I am proud of my people,’ he finally said, the air absolutely full of the huge ‘but’ that clung to the end of the line. When he didn’t deliver it, I walked over and prodded at him, handing him the drain plug back and finding the filter wrench for him.

He really looked up and met my eyes then, and there was a depth in them that told me he was wandering around in memories painful enough to bleed.

‘I’m not going to do it,’ I heard myself say, feeling desperate to salve somehow. But the claim only made his eyes widen almost fearfully.

‘No!’ he burst out, ‘You have to!’

It hadn’t been at all what I was expecting, judging from his mood, and I just blinked at him for a minute. ‘I do?’ I asked doubtfully.

He’d shuttered that look away, retreating from the flash of emotion. He took the wrench from me and turned back to the bike before telling me, ‘Look... that memorial is obviously going to happen. I can’t stop it, and... I’m not even sure I would if I could.’

He had me there. If I called Aleyah and said ‘hell no’, they’d just go down their list of artists to the next one until somebody took the job. That idea, somehow, filled me with a weird sense of possessiveness despite my utter lack of solid ideas. But Wufei wasn’t done. His hands might have been working at his oil filter, but his words showed that his attention was a million miles away.

‘If it’s going to happen,’ he said, suddenly firm where he’d been somewhat uncertain, ‘I want you to be the one to do it. I trust you.’

I about choked on a half a dozen lines, most of which probably would have made me sound nuts, but ‘I’m not sure *I* do,’ is what managed to come out.

He stood up, wrench dangling from his hand, forgotten, and stopped pretending to be paying attention to his motorcycle. ‘If there is an artist out there that can do justice to this job, Duo... it’s you.’

‘No pressure,’ I couldn’t help saying, maybe because I’d never gotten to deliver the line to Stan Kirby. I kind of wished I could have retracted it almost before it had passed the tip of my tongue, but you know what they say about barn doors and wandering horses.

Wufei didn’t even pretend to sympathize, giving me a wry little smile instead. ‘Somehow, I think the pressure was there before I said anything.’

I just snorted a noise that signified agreement, and dropped it. ‘I’ve got a couple of ideas, but...’ I began, and he raised a hand to halt the comment, turning back to his bike and his oil filter.

‘I don’t want to know,’ he said firmly. ‘I don’t want your vision blurred with my...’ he hesitated, hands working the wrench around and around, while he hunted for what he wanted to say, finally settling on, ‘perspective.’

‘If I’ve got visions,’ I said, ‘they’re already pretty damn blurry.’

He did get a look then that was maybe sympathetic. Or maybe calculating. Or maybe he was just still roving around the past inside his head and that expression he was showing wasn’t even for me.

‘You have questions,’ he guessed, ‘and you’re afraid to ask them.’

It was my turn for the sardonic look, and I fulfilled the obligation. ‘I have questions... and I don’t even know what they are.’

He laughed, but at the same time he had to look away, eyes going skyward for a moment. I wasn’t sure if I’d truly amused him, or if he was just covering up.

But I still didn’t know the questions, and I still didn’t know how to ask.

While I dithered, he seemed to remember the wrench in his hand and moved to squat beside his bike again, going back to removing the old filter.

‘I had absolutely no warning,’ he said quietly, voice measured in a way that told me he was choosing his words carefully. A mind to that perspective thing, maybe. Or just

picking his way across the mine field in his head. 'It was obviously all part of Master Long's plan. He knew when he gave me Altron and sent me to fight. *Strength is in the mind*, he said, *and the mind is a battle against oneself*. He talked about history and justice in that final hour. Believing in yourself, and not lying to yourself... and never betraying yourself. He told me to decide what was evil; told me it was what they wanted. His last words to me were to keep fighting. Fight for my own justice.'

'Why?' I heard myself ask, the question having burned a hole in my chest and forced its way out. I really, honestly had not meant to ask him that one right out loud like that, but there it was, despite my best intentions. Why had they done it?

He made this funny little snort of a noise and set the filter on the edge of the oil pan to drain, then just hunching there, staring at something that I was pretty sure wasn't on the patio with us. It took him a couple of long minutes to work out his reply, and I about bit my own tongue off trying to decide if I should pull a 'never mind!', or apologize, or just offer to leave. 'I always thought it was to keep from becoming a hostage to the enemy. To keep me from surrendering Altron. But... I'm not so sure anymore. The more time passes... the older I get... the more I think about it... I'm not so sure it wasn't all part of the bigger plan. It all happened too fast, really... almost *as* the colony would have heard the demand for me to surrender. And Master Long talking to me about extinction and the colony failing. I... just don't know.'

He stopped talking then, and I'm not sure if maybe he'd just said more than he meant to, or maybe he'd forgotten that editing job he'd meant to be doing and was rethinking what he'd said.

Or, looking back on some of my own past confessions, maybe he just needed a minute to get some of that pain back under wraps. Though... the very idea of Chang Wufei bursting into tears just about broke something inside my head. I kind of wished he didn't have his back to me, at the same time I was kind of glad he did.

'I'm sorry,' I said, shoving my hands in my pockets and studying the hedgerow that ran along the edge of his tiny space of a yard. 'I didn't mean to just... you know... blurt that out like that.'

'It's a valid question,' he replied, choosing to take the line seriously. 'One I've asked myself a million times.'

'There are dozens of theories,' I said, kind of trying to edge the conversation back to more stable, less emotional ground. 'Everything from...'

He didn't seem to want to hear the laundry list though, and suddenly pushed himself to his feet. 'My people were not pacifists,' he said, turning to look at me. 'Nor were they cowards. And yes, it was quite deliberate.'

'Sorry,' I muttered, and it was my turn to look away.

'No,' he sighed after a moment, 'I'm the one who is sorry. I don't mean to be so prickly.'

'And I don't mean to be so inept at this,' I replied, cocking my head and looking at him askance. 'You'd think I'd be more of a new age, sensitive kind of guy.'

It made him laugh and the tension eased. 'Come on,' he said and setting the wrench back in his toolbox, turned to lead the way back inside. 'This has to drain anyway.'

I followed him into the apartment and he fetched a couple bottles of juice before we settled in the living room.

‘I’m not making you late for your plans, am I?’ I ended up asking, maybe because of fears of Sally being pissed at me, and maybe just some deep-seated inability of mine to not beat around the bush and avoid the topic at uncomfortable hand.

‘No,’ he assured me. ‘We’re just taking the bike out for a ride into the hills.’

I nodded sagely, at least... in my head I did. In reality I probably just looked like a doofus.

‘Duo,’ he said gently, sitting forward and rolling his juice bottle between his hands, ‘there isn’t any easy way to have this conversation and we both know it. Stop worrying about hurting my feelings.’

It was more hurting him that was worrying me, than hurting his feelings, but I suspected that was just semantics, and not so much the issue. ‘I just feel like an ass, barging in here and making this your problem. I just didn’t feel right, accepting the commission without your blessing.’

‘You more than have my blessing,’ he smiled. ‘You’re the perfect person for the job... you were a part of it all, and I don’t think anyone who wasn’t, could ever hope to understand.’

I didn’t mention the part where neither he nor I either one seemed to really understand.

‘I want to ask a million questions,’ I confessed, ‘but I can’t get my head around where the line is between... artistic need and... none of my damn business.’

He’d uncapped his bottle and paused to take a drink before answering. ‘I really don’t want to talk too much about my feelings. It wouldn’t be right if I were to influence you. I’d feel like I was trying to direct the project.’

I almost blurted something out about olive trees and flights of doves, but refrained. ‘I think I understand, but... this is a tall damn order and I gotta tell you... I’m having trouble getting a handle on it.’

His smile took on a weird quirk that seemed almost pleased. ‘I would hope so,’ he said and it kind of reminded me of Jack Lee somehow.

He was not helping, and I sighed, taking a long swallow of my own juice while I thought about the things I needed to know to... what’d the blurb say? Embody the spirit of the people of L5? Did I really know the people of L5? Was Wufei typical? Could you call a Gundam pilot typical of anything except being a Gundam pilot?

‘What was it like there?’ I finally asked. ‘Before, I mean.’

It was almost like watching him shift gears, getting over the hump and past the painful parts to a time that, hopefully, was less painful. It’s a hard thing to do when you have something in your life that is that monumentally damaging. Hard to think about the whole without letting the memories become over-shadowed by that one thing. Hard to not let it become defining. It was something I’d let happen inside myself until fairly recently. I wasn’t ‘over’ the Maxwell Church disaster by any means, but there had been a whole lot to the church before that one single night, and Heero had helped me see that.

I wondered if Wufei could manage that same outlook, and I wondered if he’d gotten there by himself or if someone had helped him. But I suppose *that* was pretty solidly in the ‘none of my business’ realm.

Judging from the softening of Wufei’s expression... I’d have to guess he’d gotten there somehow.

‘It was green,’ he smiled, sitting back with his juice and stretching his legs out in front of him. ‘It was a very old colony... one of the first, and was a center for learning and education. The founders had put a great deal of effort into creating an environment that was both self sufficient and beautiful. There were fields and gardens... my clan produced more of our own food than any other colony cluster... but there were also meadows and trees as old as the colony itself.’

Didn’t sound a thing like L2, that was for sure. There had been a park that I recalled from my youth, but it was more a playground for the more affluent families. We’d gone there once or twice when I was with Solo and the other homeless kids, but we’d snuck in after dark and hadn’t been able to make heads or tails out of most of the stuff we’d found. Though the swings had been cool. Until Tank had just about killed himself jumping out of one. But no... I would never have described L2 as green.

‘I spent a great deal of time there as a youth,’ Wufei continued, oblivious to my mental comparisons. ‘All the children from the higher ranking families took their training and education there; it’s where the best schools were.’

It made me wonder all kinds of crap about children and the end of things, but that was a thing I really didn’t want to ask about, and maybe didn’t want to know.

Thankfully, Wufei wasn’t making me drag things out of him, and I just let him reminisce, talking about his Master Long, a teacher he obviously held in high regard, and his fellow students. It kind of brought home how much more ‘normal’ Wufei’s upbringing had been than the rest of us. Well... if you could ignore the part where he’d obviously been the planned pilot of L5’s contribution to Operation Meteor.

He painted a picture of a strong and proud people. Disciplined and educated. With a code of ethics that prized honor and justice above all things. A culture steeped in tradition.

And he told me as much with the things he didn’t say. He didn’t tell me how much he loved Master Long, he didn’t wax poetic about those rolling meadows of wild flowers, he didn’t talk about his feelings much at all. It was more about respect. About principles and duty. About purpose.

I imagined a place where love and affection were wrapped up with conduct and worth. Where many things went unsaid but were understood all the same.

It was a place where I doubted I would have flourished.

I wondered suddenly, just how close the relationship was between Wufei’s Master Long, and Wufei’s Meilan. Might the man actually have been his father in law? Or... perhaps grandfather in law?

Definitely none of my damn business, and brushing too close to a second painful topic, and I really didn’t need to bring up another one.

The juice bottles were empty, and my head was full of words that were drifting around and trying to connect, when Beowulf came ambling out of the back of the apartment, looking weirdly annoyed... like he’d been trying to sleep and all the talking had disturbed him. He made a noise that was like a chirp of complaint and then sauntered over to hop up on the corner of the coffee table, giving me the ‘who the hell are you’ eye, and sniffing the air.

‘Mangy beast,’ Wufei muttered, reaching out to ruffle the cat’s head. ‘You know Duo.’

Hearing Wufei talk to the animal was something that would never get old. It made me want to laugh with delight, but I knew it would only embarrass him if he realized how amusing I found it, and then he'd stop. I held out a hand, but Beowulf was well and truly miffed, and all I got was a murr of a sound that felt like a dressing down. Then he forgot about me, turning his attention to the front door, aiming his ears and his whiskers that way. I had not really known that he could angle his whiskers like that.

It took a minute, but the front door opened and in walked Sally. It was kind of weird to realize that the darn cat had heard/smelled/sensed her arrival probably while she'd still been on the front walk. Beowulf made a noise that seemed to come more out of his chest than his mouth, a deep, growly kind of noise, and then he took off for the back bedroom like he'd been shot.

'Rotten cat,' Sally muttered, frowning after him as though it were a ritual. Wufei chuckled and it really made me wonder about my earlier co-habitation theory.

But then Beowulf was forgotten, and the lady in question was smiling at me broadly. 'Duo! It's good to see you,' she said. 'What brings you in from the sticks?'

'We live in the burbs,' I corrected with feigned disdain. 'Two blocks up from the sticks, thank you very much.'

'Rumor has it you have a possum living in your yard,' she countered, walking into the living room area and dumping her bag on the end of the couch. 'That's close enough to the sticks for me.'

'I'm hoping the possum was just passing through,' I muttered, but was watching as she noticed the odd mood of the room, and gave Wufei a raised eyebrow look. He returned a small, almost imperceptible shake of his head and she let it go.

'That's not what Trowa told me,' she grinned at me cheekily, even while her hand trailed across Wufei's shoulder as she walked behind his chair.

'So Barton is the one spreading malicious wildlife rumors?' I asked, mostly just to keep the conversational ball in the air, because really... the communication going on in the room was of the non-verbal variety and I really didn't think anybody was paying any attention to the banter.

Wufei reached up and caught her fingers in his for a moment, and she paused to drop a kiss on the top of his head. 'I'm borrowing your shower before we go,' she informed him in a way that felt all kinds of comfortable. 'I just came from the gym.'

'You know where things are,' Wufei replied, and they traded a look... that couples look... before she turned back to me.

'I'm afraid it's been my experience that possums are seldom just passing through, Duo,' she said, gracing me with a wide grin that bordered on maliciously gleeful. 'I'll bet a cat would be just the thing to run it off.'

I snorted, just managing to keep it from being of the explosive variety. 'I'm not taking your devil cat, Po. Heero's told me stories.'

She was already on her way toward the bathroom and just tossed a laugh over her shoulder. 'I wasn't talking about mine... I was talking about Wufei's.'

'Leave Beowulf out of this, woman,' Wufei responded, saving me the trouble.

She didn't bother to reply, but after a moment we heard a muffled, 'Stop growling at me, you stupid animal!' from the back of the apartment.

Wufei chuckled in a way that almost made me wonder if he'd trained the darn cat to do that.

It left an awkward moment though, as we tried to shift gears. Or back into the gear we'd been in. Though... maybe it was just a sign that it was time to let things go. It made a good breaking point, and I already felt like my head was stuffed with more thoughts than I could keep wrangled.

'I hope I haven't messed up your whole day,' I had to tell Wufei, and he shook his head in denial of... something, his expression dancing around a cast that wanted to be melancholy.

'Not at all,' he told me, the line only sounding a little bit like politeness. 'Though I should probably get that oil change done while she's showering if we're going to get out of here on time.'

Not the most subtle dismissal I'd ever had delivered, but pretty plain to read. We stood at the same time and there was an awkward, fumbling kind of moment that ended with me throwing my arms around him in an impulsive hug.

'I'm really sorry,' I said, not even bothering to try to catalog all the things I was apologizing for. Dredging up bad memories, running barefoot through his childhood, starting his weekend off on a crap note, throwing his schedule off, the bruising on his neck. Or maybe just making him make my decisions for me.

'I know,' he said quietly, and it was better than one of those insincere lines about it being all right, when we both knew it wasn't.

The hug didn't last long, Wufei just isn't the type. At least... not that I'd ever seen. He'll offer the support to others, but wasn't much of one for parading his own pain around; he's just uncomfortable with the whole thing. I kind of hoped that wasn't the case when he was alone with Sally, because I had a feeling he was going to need a little understanding after all the crap I'd dredged up. I had to stop myself from apologizing a second time as we were making the walk to the front door. I told him to have fun on his ride, and he wished me luck on my kitchen painting and that was that.

Guilt beast was waiting in the car, sprawled across the back seat and drooling on the upholstery.

Once away from Wufei's apartment, I wasn't all that surprised to find that I shared his melancholy. Guess I should have known that stirring that pot of memories wasn't going to bring just Wufei's to the surface. It's all interlaced no matter how you look at it.

I couldn't help comparing and contrasting. I wondered where I was when Wufei had been going to school in that place. Running with Solo, I supposed. And while he was having a bride presented to him, I was probably living with the Sweepers.

Is it normal to do that? Try to put everything in perspective within the framework of your own life? I find I do that a lot and I'm not really sure why... not like it really had a thing to do with me. Both L5 and L2 were colonies, sure, but after that the similarities were pretty much done.

I admired Wufei a great deal, and while I could see how he was a product of the environment he was raised in, when I tried to imagine myself in that same environment... well, the picture just didn't come clear. I doubt the stubborn rebelliousness that had seen me through on L2, would have translated well to life on L5.

Though... then again, to hear Wufei talk about her, my stubborn wouldn't have held a candle to the stubborn of Long Meilan, so who knew?

It still qualified as afternoon when I pulled up in front of the house and parked, but I found Heero settled on the porch swing, swaying idly with a glass of ice water in his hand. He looked only slightly smug and I assumed the painting was done for the day.

‘How’d it go?’ he wanted to know, pausing the swing while I settled onto it with him.

‘Weird,’ was the only word I could find for it, though it didn’t take long before more occurred to me so I added, ‘painfully awkward,’ after a moment of swinging in silence.

Heero passed over his glass of water to share and I took a long drink. ‘I assume the kitchen is done?’

‘Yeah,’ he confirmed, the ghost of a sigh in his voice. ‘Though you were right... it’s definitely going to take a second coat.’

I had kind of suspected he’d had hopes of getting the job done in one coat, but I’d known that yellow wasn’t going to go down without a fight. I didn’t bother to tell him I wasn’t a hundred percent sure that it wasn’t going to take a third.

It took him a few minutes before he worked the words around to something he was happy with and asked, ‘Is Wufei... ok?’

‘Sally showed up,’ I said. ‘Not that he was breaking out the wine or anything.’ I glanced at him side-long, and he gave me a little smile to acknowledge the reference.

‘And you?’

I sighed and pulled my legs up, letting him do the work of keeping the swing moving. ‘Head’s so full of stuff I’m surprised it’s not leaking out my ears.’

He made a sympathetic noise and took his glass back when I handed it over.

Still on that comparison track, I couldn’t help asking, ‘Hey... where were you when it happened?’

It took him a long moment, and he turned away to look out across the porch while he thought about it. ‘Getting my head messed with by Treize Khushrenada and the Epyon.’

I repressed a shudder; I was not a big fan of either. Treize, as far as I was concerned, had been a card carrying nut job, and the Epyon just a product of that nut jobbery.

‘Busy times,’ I muttered and it made him laugh, quite despite himself. He raised the glass in a mock salute and took a drink.

‘So,’ he said, and I wasn’t sure if he was just changing the topic or not, ‘you going to take the job?’

‘Wufei says I have to,’ I replied, grinning so he wouldn’t think I was really serious in a bad sense. ‘Just as well, since my head doesn’t seem to want to let go of the idea.’

‘I noticed,’ he said blandly, a pointed little poke over my artistic paint roller musings, and I winced.

‘Did it brush out ok?’ I asked.

His smile was kind of weird; had a hint of some strange, almost amused affection to it that somehow just left me more embarrassed. ‘Mostly. I think the second coat will finish it off.’

I would have apologized again, but he would have either laughed or tried to reassure. Either would have made me uncomfortable, so I just skipped it and decided to go on in the house to see how things looked.

It was kind of amazing what a difference a change of color made, though our green was a little bit more ‘grass’ than it was supposed to be, but I knew that was the yellow showing through. It wasn’t too bad though, so I felt a little more confident that one more day would see the job done. The trim would wait until everything else was finished, mostly because we hadn’t decided exactly what we were doing there.

‘Nice job, Yuy,’ I teased. ‘If you ever decide to give up that Preventer gig, you can go into house painting.’

‘Thanks, but I think I’ll pass,’ he said dryly, and gestured me to follow him out of the room, wrinkling his nose to tell me we were fleeing the smell. He was right; the fumes weren’t quite so bad once we were out of the kitchen. The plastic wasn’t going to completely block it, of course, but it was a little better.

‘You could be missing a huge opportunity,’ I continued, ‘you could be passing up a glorious career in interior design. Reality TV even! *When Ex-terrorists Decorate!*’

‘Sometimes it scares me how your mind works,’ he said and it made me grin.

‘Only sometimes?’

He snorted and shook his head, leaving the line alone so he didn’t have to confirm or deny, and headed for the couch. ‘I want to catch the weather...’ he began, but then hesitated when he reached for the remote. ‘Oh hey... we forgot these.’

I looked where his attention had gone, and there sat the brightly wrapped packages from Hayden and Toria, right where we’d left them the night before. ‘Oh yeah...’ I said and Heero glanced at me.

‘Should I be nervous that you sound nervous?’

I sighed and couldn’t help the almost embarrassed grin. ‘Toria’s sense of humor is sometimes... more crude than humorous.’

‘I’m so shocked,’ he muttered under his breath and sat down before picking up the packages. I sat down beside him and he handed me mine. ‘You first?’

‘Chicken,’ I jibed, and began picking at the tape. Toria likes tape.

‘I prefer the term *prudent*,’ he said, but relented and started unwrapping his own. He turned out to be a picker... meticulously slitting the tape and folding the paper back out of his way. We both got down to our plain, unmarked boxes at about the same time and I had to resist the urge to hold my breath as I worked the tab loose and lifted the lid. It was a mug, and when I pulled mine out and looked at the grinning face under the yellow elf hat on the front, I didn’t even have to look to know what was on Heero’s.

He snorted and held out his Grumpy mug next to my matching Happy mug.

‘In the grand scheme of things,’ I said, ‘not nearly as bad as I was expecting.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ he chuckled. ‘You didn’t get the pissy dwarf.’

‘Did I never mention the vinyl blow-up sex doll I got from Toria as a ship-launch gift?’ I asked, and his expression did this slow fade from slightly amused to horrified, as he considered the possibilities.

‘Toria named her ‘Bunny’ and she came with three different outfits, including a wedding veil.’

‘She?’ he couldn’t quite help asking and I snickered, remembering the day and the extra level of awkwardness that had been all in my head.

‘Oh yeah... they didn’t know I was gay back then, if you will recall,’ I said, turning my Happy mug in my hands and looking it over. ‘So not only did I get a crass gift, it was inappropriate in more ways than one.’

Heero looked back at his own mug with a deeper appreciation of Toria’s restraint. ‘Guess I’ll take a Grumpy over a Bunny.’

‘Probably a Bruno, at this point,’ I corrected, and had a moment of wandering down a mental path of ‘what if’ that made me shudder. What-ifying Toria Brannigan never works out; there’s just no telling what the woman will do next. Before the loss of their ship, Toria’d had her own t-shirt collection, and her favorite read ‘No fear, no class, no filters’ and it was definitely truth in advertizing.

Maybe someday I would confess to the rest of the Bunny story... she’d had a long and sordid history before she met her fate... but today was not that day. I took Grumpy and Happy and put them on the mantel for safe-keeping until the kitchen was done.

‘I’m going to go clean up while you watch the news,’ I told Heero and he settled onto the couch while I hied off to change out of my paint clothes.

I hadn’t the heart to tell Heero that the Grumpy reference was probably going to be one of those things that never went away. Toria has a way of driving a joke into the ground and beyond. Not that he should complain; at least Grumpy had been the smart one, I was pretty sure Happy had just been on something. Nobody, dwarf or not, is *that* damn happy all the time.

I lost a couple of minutes in there somewhere, trying to decide if I could correlate all five of us guys to a dwarf, but it sort of fell apart when I admitted that really... if anybody was Grumpy, it was Wufei, not Heero.

Solo muttering ‘Y’re weird,’ from somewhere in the ether, prodded me to move on. I left my paint clothes folded on top of my dresser for reuse the next day, and went down the hall to the spare room where we had the main computer set up.

If Meilan and her folks had been in the census records... Master Long would be there too.

Wizened was probably the first word to spring to mind when I set eyes on the man. Though, I had to admit, if Wufei hadn’t actually said Master Long was a guy, I’m not sure I’d have known. He was aged past the point of gender. Hell... he could have been an alien. I wondered about his age, but when I went to that field to look it up, the birth date was empty. Ancient, I had no doubt. I could image that the man had been there when the colony had been in the planning stages.

Since it was just me inside my own head, and nobody listening to my observations, I could say it... the guy was funny looking. Wizened, I’d said, and it was true. He was wrinkled and hunched and just... the very face of *Old*.

But there was something about him. After a few minutes of studying the images, ‘wizened’ gave way to ‘venerable’. He wasn’t old because time had made him that way; he was old because he’d lived himself that way. I was filled with an immense sense of loss over what had died with the man. The knowledge, the memories. What all had been stored in that mind that had existed nowhere else? The scope of the things he would have seen... the things he would have experienced... was just too great to comprehend. I would bet money he had been more than a hundred years old, and I just couldn’t fathom the lives he would have touched. The minds he would have sparked to life through his

teaching. How many students had passed through his hands? The connections, when I tried to imagine them, made a grand spoke of golden lines out from Master Long like...

'He looks like a frog,' Solo said inside my ear, and the picture I'd been building in my head shattered, thankfully, right before it morphed into something that looked creepily like a spider-web.

'I know,' I replied and knew he was right. There was no damn way I could make a monument with Master Long as the subject, and not have most people see... nothing but the wizened, stooped old man who looked like a frog.

Another idea shot to hell before it half formed.

'Good thing,' Solo informed me, deigning to appear beside me, leaning down to peer at the screen. 'Cause it was a total suck idea.'

'Everybody's a critic,' I hissed at him, and he laughed before drifting out through the wall.

I spent the next hour randomly scrolling through the record archives, trying to make eye contact with pixels. Trying to meet 'the people of L5'. Trying to figure out what in the hell I was doing. But mostly just trying to convince myself I really was going to say yes to the job, and wasn't going to panic and bail out at the last minute.

I gave up when I heard Heero rummaging around in the bedroom, shutdown and went to see what he was doing. I had a slow-blink moment when I found him standing at the foot of the bed, shaking out his ball shirt.

'The weather looks good for most of the week,' Heero commented when I came into the room, and there was a hint to his tone of voice that was a little too casual. 'Shouldn't be any danger of a rain out.'

I went and sprawled out across the bed to watch as he checked the shirt over, though I'm sure he knew just what shape it was in from when he put it away the previous season. 'Opening game's this week, right?' For the record, I think I did a better job of sounding casual.

'Monday night,' he confirmed, his attention on the shirt as he found a hanger and hung it on the bedroom doorknob.

'Are we having dinner first,' I asked, just getting things out on the table before we got any weirder on the topic. 'Or will we eat after?'

He snorted and turned to give me a smile, 'Eat after, or nobody's going to feel like running around a ball field.'

'Makes sense,' I said, and rolled over to make room for him on the bed. 'Guess I won't starve for a couple of hours.'

His smile grew just a little bit, and he came to join me. 'So you're going?'

I couldn't deny the signs that told me he was pleased, but I still couldn't help asking, 'if you're sure it's not intruding...'

'Never,' he murmured, and I got a little bit of ear nuzzling.

'And you're sure it's ok with Wufei?' I pressed, and did a little of my own nibbling, only partly so I didn't have to meet his eyes and feel even more lame than I did for my own weird insecurities.

I think there was a bit of a sigh, but I wasn't entirely sure, so I opted to pretend it was a sound of appreciation for what my fingers were doing just under the hem of his shirt. 'I promise,' he assured me, 'Wufei will be thrilled to see you there.'

And then we dropped the subject for another that didn't require as much talk.

We ended up just sort of staying there for the night, even though it was a little bit early, but somehow neither of us felt much like getting back up. The result was my waking at a hideously early hour, and with nothing to do but stare at the ceiling or stare at Heero, I opted to slip out of bed and go on down to start round two of the paint job. I owed Heero a couple of hours of work, after all. And while watching him sleep wasn't all that painful, it was also kind of creepy if you thought about it too hard.

Painting is so damn dull. Especially after the first coat where there isn't even any real color change. I broke the job up by focusing on one wall at a time, doing the edges with the brush and then going back to roll the rest. Sure as hell didn't want to get off track again and find myself painting frog faced old men on the appliances or something. With the masking already done, things were going much faster and I was almost half way done before Heero woke and came down to find me.

'What the hell time did you get up?' he wanted to know, looking around him at a room that was much less 'grass' and much more the settled on 'Appalachian Morning Dew'.

'Didn't notice,' I hedged, and grinned. 'Not my fault somebody's a lay a'bed.'

'Not my fault somebody's incapable of sleeping more than six hours at a time,' he grumbled, and grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl that was currently living on top of the fridge, making it his breakfast before starting in to help me finish.

It only took us until lunch time, once we were working together, to finish the whole job. It was a high-five kind of moment, knowing we'd accomplished what we'd set out to, and effectively moved the job schedule ahead by two days. I had hopes that we'd have our kitchen back before we saw the end of another week. Which would be good before Heero gave himself a coronary fussing over our nutritional intake. I had thought to myself that he probably wasn't going to stand for one more pizza or bucket of chicken, and I had that notion confirmed that day when I grabbed a ration bar and soda for my lunch. There was the sound a long, kind of resigned sounding sigh, and when I looked over at Heero, found a look on his face to match. Wordlessly, he held out his hand and I tried not to grin as I gave him one for himself. Took him long enough to admit there was merit to my eating habits.

He got himself a glass of his iced green tea and we took our lunch outside to eat on the front porch in the fresh air.

Ration bars are... not even an acquired taste, they're a mind set. The zen of intake that abandons all flavor. Eating is not a thing that is meant to be about pleasure. It's a biological necessity that is best answered without muddying the waters with things like taste. Taste leads to over indulgence, and over indulgence leads to bad things all around.

And leave my soda out of it; that's an entirely different arena.

I tried not to be smug, sitting on the front steps and munching happily on my lunch, while Heero sat beside me and nibbled slowly on his, trying not to look like he wanted to gag.

'These things are awful,' he said, somewhat predictably.

'It's all in what you get used to,' I replied blandly, chewing with a little extra gusto, just to be a shit.

'There's something of the masochist in you,' he said and brushed at the crumbs that had fallen into his lap.

‘Pragmatist,’ I corrected, and turned to give him the full effect of my haughty look, but he wasn’t watching, staring instead at the porch steps.

‘Duo,’ he said, ‘the ants don’t even want the crumbs...’

He chuckled when he made me look. ‘Asshole,’ I began, but the aimless conversation was interrupted by the shrill voice of the little girl who lived up the street. ‘Mr. Duo! Mr. Heero!’

We turned to see the Rubins just cresting the hill and coming into sight. Or, at least, the missus and the kids. I had yet to meet a Mr. Rubin and only assumed he even existed.

I waved in reply and Ruthie broke into that strange little kid method of traveling that used twice as much energy as walking; the skip. Then Bobby took off running to out distance her, which made Ruthie holler something about ‘fair’ and she started running too, and they arrived on our bottom step way ahead of their mother, jostling and arguing about who had gotten there first.

‘Afternoon,’ I addressed them, just to stop the discussion on who had beaten who and the injustice of it all.

‘Hi, Mr. Duo!’ Ruthie was quick to reply, and I wondered if she hadn’t been racing still when she gave her brother a sly little smirk. Guess when you were the younger sibling you took your moral victories where you could get them.

‘Afternoon, Mr. Maxwell, Mr. Yuy,’ Bobby said, going for a more grown up sound over the speed, his expression a smug echo of his sister’s.

I’d bet good money that life at the Rubin place was never quiet. I was just relieved they hadn’t brought the little dog, because we hadn’t had a run in with Buffy since Heero had almost had a flash-back on our lawn over her.

Mrs. Rubin had picked up her pace, perhaps afraid of leaving the conversation in the hands of her vocal children for too long, and arrived before they resorted to shoving each other. She was just opening her mouth to do the greet and salutation thing, when Ruthie noticed our lunch.

‘What are you eating, Mr. Duo?’ she wanted to know, leaning in for a closer look. ‘Is that a granola bar like Mom puts in my lunch?’

‘Granola bars have more flavor,’ Heero muttered and she looked at him with a wrinkled nose look, though I don’t think he’d meant for her to hear.

‘These are military rations, kiddo,’ I informed her and Bobby perked up, leaning in for a closer look too.

‘But why are you eating *that*?’ She asked, looking vaguely like she was thinking about reaching out and taking a bite. ‘Don’t you have any bologna?’

‘*Ruthie...*’ Mrs. Rubin warned in a tone of voice that was both exasperated and tired, as though she sort of knew there wasn’t any stifling the child, but she felt she had to at least appear to try.

I chuckled at the lot of them. ‘We’re having our kitchen remodeled,’ I explained, ‘and cooking is kind of hard right now.’

‘You are?’ Ruthie blurted, weird lunch forgotten. ‘Can I see?’

‘*Ruthie!*’ Mrs. Rubin admonished, and managed to work up some real indignation.

‘What?’ Ruthie said, turning around to look at her Mom, all wide-eyed and confused about what was getting her yelled at. ‘You said you wondered what all the trucks were for!’

Bobby elbowed his sister, with a theatric eye roll and I’m sure he thought he was making brownie points with Mom. ‘Don’t repeat things, you doofus.’

That, rather predictably, just riled Ruthie up and she whirled around to wail for support over the name calling. Poor Mrs. Rubin looked like she couldn’t decide if she was going to combust on the spot or start wailing herself.

Or start whaling on a couple of kid’s butts.

‘Sure!’ I exclaimed, jumping in to derail the whole thing, because there was just nowhere good it could go from there. I popped the last of my ration bar in my mouth, stood up, and dusted the crumbs off my pants. ‘Right this way, ladies and gentleman... though the place is a mess and don’t touch anything green; it’s probably still wet.’

The line made the kids laugh and Mrs. Rubin look nervous. She had Ruthie by the hand before they finished getting through the front door.

‘Oh heavens!’ Mrs. Rubin exclaimed almost immediately, ‘you closed the kitchen door off!’

It hit me kind of weirdly... I had forgotten that the woman was well acquainted with the place from being friends with the former owners. What had been meant as a distraction for Ruthie’s sake, before the poor kid got herself into trouble, was suddenly making me feel... defensive? Guilty? Like I should be explaining all my decorating decisions?

‘It made sense from a space stand point,’ Heero supplied, and I couldn’t tell if he realized the comment made me feel odd, or if the comment made him feel odd too.

‘Trishie would be thrilled!’ Mrs. Rubin replied, looking around in fascination, her irritation with Ruthie forgotten by the lure of getting to see what we’d done with a place she’d known before. ‘She hated all the doorways in that room, but it was such a fight getting Les to close off the outside door, that she had let it go.’

‘What outside door?’ Ruthie wanted to know, moving at the limit of her and her mother’s combined reach, to see everything she could see. It reminded me of the time she’d come by with her little dog pulling at the leash, and I had to stifle a chuckle.

‘There was an old door over there,’ I said, gesturing to the corner. ‘It came out where that stone slab is outside.’

‘It *was* a secret door!’ Ruthie cried, looking exultant at the discovery. ‘I knew it!’

‘Dummy, it wasn’t...’ Bobby began, but I wasn’t about to let the name calling thing get started again.

‘I guess it was!’ I agreed, ignoring his muttering. ‘It was sure a surprise to us when we pulled the drywall down.’

Mrs. Rubin appeared to have missed the by-play, though Ruthie turned and stuck her tongue out at her older brother.

Bobby just rolled his eyes, as though he were above all that tongue stuff, and then got a smug look. ‘Well, there really *is* a hidden room!’

‘There is?’ Ruthie and I both wanted to know and Bobby’s smug look turned excited, that he knew something about our house that I, apparently, didn’t know myself.

‘Yeah!’ he enthused. ‘Under the stairs!’

Ah; the cool closet. I wondered how many years it had been since he'd been in the house. Wondered how old he'd been. I could imagine Trishie playing the dotting Grandma figure, showing the kid where the 'secret room' was with a twinkle in her eye.

'I wanna see!' Ruthie almost shouted, bouncing up and down and looking up at her mother imploringly.

'Do you remember the way?' Heero asked Bobby and I thought the kid was going to puff up like one of those fish with his own self importance. Especially when Heero gave him the nod to take his sister and go. It kind of surprised me that he didn't mind letting the kids run around the house unattended, though I supposed they weren't going far. Kinda made me nervous that Mrs. Rubin looked nervous though, and I was more than happy to follow her lead and step back into the living room a pace or two, just to keep the little buggers in sight.

Our previous meeting with Mrs. Rubin had been under some slightly awkward circumstances and she'd exhibited a lot of nervous fidgeting that, at the time, I had attributed to the situation. But without Ruthie there to keep them busy, I noticed her hands hunting for things to do with themselves. Her shirt needed to be smoothed, her hair needed to be tucked. I wondered if she was one of those people who had become a mother so much that she didn't know what to do with herself outside the role.

'It's amazing how different things look,' she said, her attention more on where the kids were and what they were up to than on us.

'You'll have to come by when it's done,' Heero chuckled, and gestured us in the general direction of the sitting area in the living room, though I'm sure Mrs. Rubin had to take it on faith that there was someplace to sit beyond the boxes and the partly assembled cabinetry.

There was a sudden giggle and the cry of '*Cool!*' from down the hall and I couldn't help a grin.

'That closet is what sold the house,' I confessed, knowing nobody would believe me anyway, because the thing really was pretty damn cool.

Mrs. Rubin perched herself on the edge of one of the couches and Heero and I settled across the coffee table from her on the other one. She was trying to look around at everything, while not appearing to look around at everything at the same time she was digging in her purse, trying to find something by feel. When she pulled out an envelope, I couldn't help shifting forward myself, having an inkling of what it was from the look of it.

'I hunted up some pictures...' she began and I managed to exhibit enough patience that I didn't snatch them from her hand. I waited while she opened the envelope and sorted through them, handing one across.

I took it, turning it around and holding it where Heero could see it too.

'That's Bobby,' Mrs. Rubin explained, 'in the side yard in front of the roses.'

'Holy shit,' I muttered, without thinking. 'That's what the fence row is going to look like?'

Mrs. Rubin blushed, but couldn't help a funny grin. 'Any day now,' I was informed, and it was all I could do not to go look out the window to see if anything had happened yet.

It was... awesome. An explosion of golden color. The fence wasn't much, really, a decorative thing that only ran along the north side of the property, they call it a split

rail, I understand. The rose bushes cover maybe three sections near the front, and in the picture, the poor fence looked like it was struggling to hold up the weight of the profusion of blooms.

‘I’m not sure you’ll get a display quite like that,’ Mrs. Rubin was saying. ‘They’ve grown wild for so many years. They were Trishie’s pride and joy, but they did take a lot of work.’

I wondered at her using the rose picture as the opening one and remembered the kids mentioning their mother’s affection for them on their first visit. Almost sounded like she was trying to sell us on them.

‘Don’t worry,’ I reassured. ‘I wouldn’t dream of taking them out.’

She looked relieved at the same time she tried to sputter out something that sounded like her tongue couldn’t figure out if she was supposed to be apologizing or thanking.

‘What was Bobby?’ Heero asked, kind of over-riding her embarrassment and giving her a second to regroup, ‘about two?’

‘Not quite two,’ she said, going back to shuffling through the pictures, then just seemed to decide the hell with it and began lying them out on the coffee table, turned our way.

There was a picture of the front porch and there were hanging flower baskets all the hell over the place. There were shutters that weren’t there now and I wondered what had happened to them. There was another picture of Bobby sitting in the grass beside the north flower garden, and you could see the edge of the door that was no longer there. There was another with Bobby and a dog that wasn’t Buffy next to the apple tree before the tree had died. One of the dog with its nose stuck to the crack in the shed door, obviously sniffing after something it deemed fascinating, and I wondered just how many generations of possums had been dwelling in there.

From down the hall there came a weird, echoing little kid roaring noise and more giggling. Mrs. Rubin looked up, but didn’t seem to be too alarmed.

‘Les told Bobby that closet was a dragon cave once,’ she explained. ‘He used to go in there and make all kinds of funny growling noises because of that echo. Bobby thought it was great fun... until it was bedtime. I never had the heart to tell Les he gave him nightmares.’

I couldn’t help laughing, and I wondered how old he’d been and then I wondered if the kid was just passing the nightmares on down to his sister. It was weird as hell to feel the weight of a history that wasn’t ours. But then, I suppose that history is what had drawn me in the first place.

Heero was asking Mrs. Rubin something about the side yard and the vanishing kitchen door, but that was when I found the picture that had to have been of the former owner’s themselves and I have to admit that I kind of stopped listening.

You know how you tend to build up mental pictures of people you never met? Like envisioning characters in a book you’re reading? Trishie did not kill my notions overly much, but I’d missed Les by a mile.

I’d expected him to be a tiny, mousey little guy, but he looked the part of the handyman he’d tried to be, but hadn’t been. Had I met the guy in the home improvement store and he’d offered me advice on whatever I was buying... I’d have accepted it without a thought. He just looked like he could have been a construction worker or

something in his youth. Big guy with big hands, smiling at the camera while he filled Trishie's held out apron with apples from their tree.

Trishie herself... and how had I ever thought the woman went by Pat? The trim, laughing woman in the photo had an air of grace about her that just wouldn't have a thing to do with 'Pat'... was very much the neat, petite little white-haired lady I'd envisioned. Everybody's grandma because she got to send you home to your folks at the end of the day, full of homemade cookies and lemonade.

I found myself wondering what had happened to Les. Though seeing the adoring look on Trishie's face, I could guess what had happened to her. I almost asked, but then decided I didn't want to know.

Somebody said my name, and I didn't have to admit I hadn't been paying attention when there was suddenly the sound of somebody stomping up the stairs, and the previous conversation died in its tracks.

'*Robert Jordan Rubin!*' Mrs. Rubin snapped, shock and embarrassment written all over her face. 'What on earth are you doing? You stop that this instant!'

Bobby whirled around and it was almost comical to watch his expression change. There was a moment of rebellion while he thought about arguing, but his eyes flicked toward Heero and me and it quickly changed to a bright red look of sheer horror... like he'd forgotten where he was. And then he jumped at the only adult he apparently thought would back him up. Too bad that adult was long dead.

'But... but... Grandpa Dent used to do it!' he blurted out, just standing there on the fourth step up, one hand on the rail and not able to figure out who he should be talking to. 'He had me stand in the closet and then he'd stomp and... and...'

'I suppose it would sound pretty weird,' I tried, because the poor kid just looked like he was facing his doom and it kind of made me wonder why he seemed to have more manners than his sister. Or maybe it was just the age difference and it wasn't manners so much as filters. I'm not exactly a kid expert.

'I don't care, young man,' his mother all but growled at him. 'This is Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Yuy's house now and you know better than to act like that in somebody else's home.'

I wanted to ask if that implied it was ok to act that way in their own home, but it didn't seem politic, so I just let the thought go.

Ruthie chose that moment to come running down the hall, looking quizzically up at her brother. 'Why'd you quit?' she wanted to know. 'Nothing happened yet!'

'That will be enough, you two!' their mother declared, and apparently the visit was over. I started to do my own sputtering, but Mrs. Rubin was gathering her purse and her errant children, but leaving the pile of photos, and I guess I really didn't need to have any sort of narration anyway. Everything I'd seen so far was pretty self explanatory.

'It's all right,' Heero was trying to soothe, 'no harm done...'

But apparently, when Mrs. Rubin got poked in the Mommy piss off button, she forgot about being fidgety. 'No, it is not all right that my children,' and this was punctuated with a glare in the proper direction that made Bobby leave the stairs and the siblings kind of huddle together in an attempt at a united front, 'can not remember their manners in public. March, you two!'

And just like that, they were headed for the front door. Mrs. Rubin gathered her purse and her dignity and bid us good day.

‘Do you care if I make copies of the pictures?’ I managed to squeeze in, but was pooh-poohed breezily.

‘Those are yours to keep,’ she informed me, seeming relieved that she had a way of balancing out what she considered the unruly behavior of her off-spring. ‘I printed copies from the computer.’

We just settled on a quiet thanks and saw them out. The lecturing started before they got down the hill.

We stood on the porch and watched them disappear down the street and then Heero couldn’t contain a funny little chuckle any more. ‘Kids... are kind of weird.’

‘Not any weirder than Moms,’ I said. ‘I really didn’t think they were all that bad.’

‘The stomping was a bit much,’ Heero replied, and turned to go back in the house. ‘He could have at least explained himself first. Or asked.’

‘I dunno,’ I said, following after, ‘it probably does sound pretty cool. And he seemed like he was having trouble remembering...’

And that was when we found the green fingerprints on the front door.

‘I...’ Heero said in that voice he has that just begs for patience, ‘am going to kill somebody.’

‘So you can do jail time and stick me with this mess? Forget it Yuy.’

We found the smear in the kitchen and traced it from there. My money was on Ruthie based on the height, but you never knew.

We spent most of the rest of the afternoon doing repair work on the smudges in the kitchen and then hunting through the house for fingerprints and cleaning them up. There were a surprising number of them. It somehow reminded me of Coquette, and I was just about ready to swear off visitors forever. I suppose I should just be glad they hadn’t brought Buffy too.

We probably spent more time than we had to on the clean-up, but once we found the smear on the downstairs bathroom door, we started second guessing where all the little darlings had been poking around, and wanted to make doubly sure we found it all before it had a chance to really dry.

After that we had to clean up the general painting mess, to make way for the return of our construction crew the next day.

It was evening before we got to sit down with the pictures again.

The house had sat empty for several years before we’d bought it, so we’d never seen anything but the bare bones. An empty canvas, if you will. When we had chosen where to put our furniture, when we’d picked our colors and fabrics, we weren’t influenced at all by what had gone before. It was really kind of weird to see glimpses of how it had been. There were a lot more floral prints and light colors. More knick-knacks and frills. Trishie’s hand was more than evident inside the house and out. It made me wonder what Les had done for a living. Maybe he was a traveling salesman or something, and was on the road a lot. Leaving Trishie with nothing to do but tend the yard.

I couldn’t help going back to that picture of them picking apples, and it made me sad that the tree hadn’t lived. Made me feel guilty for starting the job of cutting it down. Though I suppose there was evidence in the background in a picture or two, of things that weren’t there any longer. So she’d done her own cutting down and digging out.

They looked to probably be in their seventies at least, in the apple picture, and still seemed to be as happy as little clams together. I wondered how long they’d lived in

the house. Wondered if maybe they'd actually built it. Kind of made me wish Mrs. Rubin had brought the pictures down without the kids so that maybe she'd have hung around and I could have asked to see if she had any answers.

Heero was arranging some of the pictures in a line, trying to build a complete picture of the north side of the house, where most of the shots appeared to have been taken. I watched him for a minute, trying to imagine him old and gray, but I couldn't make the image come clear. He just looked like he did, only... gray.

'Hey,' I asked, finding my mood riding an edge that could go melancholy or could go sappy. 'You think we'll still be living here when we're old enough for that senior discount thing?'

Heero made a derisive noise, and shifted two of the pictures in his line. 'Sure as hell hope so, because that moving business sucks.'

I snorted and let it go... guess his mood wasn't sappy or melancholy. But then he glanced over at the picture I was looking at, and reached to take it. He studied it for a moment before looking up to meet my gaze and maybe he did get the mood.

'And if not... we'll still be together wherever we are, so it doesn't matter.'

I guess sappy beat the hell out of melancholy anyway, so I met his smile and went with that. We had a few more years yet before we had to start worrying about gray hair and cataracts. At least... I sure as hell hoped we did.

Heero laid the picture down with the others on the table, suddenly seeming done with them. 'Come on,' he said, 'we need to be getting cleaned up and ready for bed.'

Kind of surprised me how late it was.

We decided to do that 'conserve water' thing, and once we were actually in the shower under the spray of water, I got confirmation that Heero had, indeed, caught the mood.

'Wash your hair for you?' he wanted to know when I came out from under the shower head from wetting it down, though it was hardly a question since he already had a palm full of my shampoo. It's not something he does all that often, so I obligingly turned my back and tilted my head.

Didn't take him long to have a nice lather worked up and then he set to work. Heero doesn't just wash your hair, it's almost more like a complete massage of your head. Had made me feel a little weird the first time he'd done it, but I kind of categorized it in that gray area of 'almost foreplay' and had come to accept that he enjoyed doing it, so it made it all right for me to enjoy it too. Or, perhaps, luxuriate in it, would be a closer description.

Were it possible, I would probably purr.

The conditioning part is almost as decadent as he combs it through my hair with long strokes of his fingers. 'Where'd you get so good at this?' I asked idly and his answering chuckle held a hint of something that was flirting with nostalgia.

'I had to learn when...' he began and then hesitated, as though stopping to hear himself, questioning in his own mind if he should continue. It wasn't more than a pause before he went on, 'you were in the hospital. You wouldn't let anybody else touch it.'

I understood his faltering then, and gathered from his tone that it was one of those times he'd decided not to mince words.

'Oh,' was the best I could manage while I snuck around the memories best left lie, to get at the topic at hand. 'I... did?'

He chuckled again, his hands returning to my scalp to begin another slow, gentle trek the length of my hair. 'Rather forcefully. I think one of the nurses was dying to get your braid undone, just to see, because there was more than one... altercation.'

'There was?' I asked brightly. 'I don't remember any of them acting all that interested.'

'I believe she transferred to another ward,' he said so blandly that I could almost believe he had nothing at all to do with it. 'But I think she made you even more determined about it. It was early on.'

'I... don't really remember...' I said, though I wondered if maybe I did. A little. I could remember an incident that ended with me getting... demanding. I poked at the memory, but didn't get much more than shards.

'...really needs washed, Mr. Maxwell...'

'...don't care. Heero will do it...'

'...no need to get upset, we do this all the...'

'...No! Where's Heero? I want Heero...'

My hair? I'd thrown a hissy fit over... getting my hair washed?

Heero's fingers had gone from hair to neck and shoulders, and I think he was just judging the level of tension. I shook the memories away and turned at his prodding so we could get the conditioner rinsed out. We were at that warm and relaxed stage where kissing water off each other's skin was just too tempting to not indulge in.

We had to throw half the towels we owned down on the bed to keep from soaking the sheets.

There had been an intensity to Heero's love making since the kidnapping (waylayment? Personal hijacking?) that kind of made me feel bad, understanding what was driving it, but was kind of impossible not to enjoy. A lot.

Heero positively gloated the next morning while I was hauling ass to get ready for work on time, and he was able to just lie in bed and watch me.

At least there was no argument over the ration bar I grabbed on the way out of the house. Not that Heero would be lying around all day; the contractors were due within the hour. The decadent lazing had been purely for my benefit. I'm sure Heero had been up and dressed before I hit the freeway.

I sat in my car after I'd parked in the Preventer's lot and pulled out my cell. I debated which number to call before deciding that I really didn't want to risk actually having to talk to Aleyah at that hour, and called the gallery number instead. Mr. Lee had said my decision had to be made by Monday morning and I didn't want to appear to be indulging in divaish head games by making them call me. I'd been planning on leaving a message and getting on with my day, so it surprised the hell out of me when somebody picked the damn phone up. I'd thought it would be too early.

'Expressions,' the curt voice of Ms. Tartan said, 'how can I help you?'

There might have been a beat of delay there, while I switched gears, but I hoped it wasn't too obvious. 'Good morning, this is Duo Maxwell...'

'Good morning, Mr. Maxwell,' she replied. 'There's no problem with the assignment, I hope?'

'No,' I assured, though she didn't sound all that concerned. 'I just needed to leave a message for Aleyah. I've made my decision... I'm taking the job.'

There was another one of those moments of delay, but it was on her end this time. ‘Oh,’ she said finally, sounding just a little bit confused. ‘I thought that was already settled. Well... no matter; I will let Miss Winner know.’

‘Uh... thanks,’ I said and tried to hide the tone of frustration while we signed off. It kind of pisses me off sometimes how sure Aleyah Winner is of me.

But then, I suppose if I didn’t just go with the flow most of the time where she was concerned, things might be different.

The weekend appeared to have worked some of the ‘lazy’ out of the crew, or else Griff’s dire warnings of docking pay had done it. Either way, Monday morning saw a much more focused garage. I myself finished the windshield installation and did two oil changes before lunch.

Though we still didn’t get the tennis ball back, not that anybody dared ask for it. Lunch. Now there’s a thing that had become... awkward. I have to confess that trotting off for my usual sandwich at the Andover had become not all that attractive an idea. But I hate the grease pit across the street like a burning case of heart burn. There were not a lot of other options. I suppose I could have taken the car and driven somewhere outside the area, but that just seemed kind of... lame.

I’d been back to the deli once since the... imprisonment, mostly so that I could thank the clerk for her part in identifying the SoA crew, but hadn’t quite been able to make myself return after that. Heero was not aware of it, but I’d been packing my lunch since. Usually a ration bar squirreled away in my glove box so that he didn’t see it.

Guess what I hadn’t remembered that morning? I’d have just skipped it if it had been any other day, but knowing we’d be out late at the ball game, and not knowing when dinner would actually happen, I had to admit that it was a stupid notion.

I had no problem justifying the change in routine under the guise of many different excuses, but really... I know when I’m being lame. And skipping lunch completely, because the idea of going back to the place where I’d gotten royally embarrassed, was uncomfortable... was pretty damn lame.

So I trotted off that day trying not to think about it too hard.

The deli was a little more crowded than it had been the day of the... event, which helped a little bit. The clerk really couldn’t spare the time to try to engage me too much, I just got the extra perky hello and at some point during the investigation, she’d figured out my name, so I got addressed by it now. It had made me make the effort to learn hers in return, so I was able to wish her a good day by name before I took my sandwich and retreated to a table out of line of sight of the register. She was a nice girl and all, but I’d been a bit nervous that she was going to get up the nerve to ask for my number or some damn thing.

People watching isn’t nearly as fun when some part of the back of your mind is playing the ‘what are they up to’ game. As weird as it probably sounds, the thing about the kidnapping that sticks in my craw the most is that I’d fallen for the dumb-ass drink switch ploy. That I hadn’t been the slightest bit suspicious of Hardy even though there had been something niggling at me about the man. That I’d not even noticed Goddard following me out of the deli.

Hindsight made it all so obvious it was... it was just damned embarrassing. And I think we’ve already established just how well I handle embarrassment.

Would have been bad enough if I'd fallen prey to an actual paramilitary group or something, but knowing they were nothing but a bunch of amateurs just made it all the worse. Though, I suppose if they hadn't been so pathetic, the plot might not have unraveled quite the way it had, and I'd have ended up nothing but a casualty of hero worship.

It still causes me moments of reflection when I stop to think about those hours of lying in that dark basement in that old abandoned house... and add in the explosives I hadn't known were there.

For a brief moment I wondered if there might not be a place for me in the record books for most death defying moments, but then shook the notion away... probably most cops and firefighters could trump me.

I finished my lunch in short order and didn't hang around. Didn't stop for my soda either, and it had nothing to do with the teenaged kid who was standing there dropping coins into the machine.

I'd barely used twenty minutes of my lunch hour and when I arrived back at the garage, all the other guys were still gone, except for Griff. He seldom goes anywhere, usually just eating at his desk, using the time to go over reports or some damn thing. We all have our routines, and Griff is well aware of all of them. Hell, I think the guy probably knows what every individual in the employ of the Preventer agency does for lunch. And I was sure he'd noted my change in habits. The first couple of days of my fetching my ration bar and choosing to find someplace to sit and read instead of going out, I'd been holding my breath, waiting for him to say something, but he never had.

So I was a little surprised that day to come wandering back from a trip that was more normal than it had been in weeks, and notice Griff noticing me.

I'd gone to the soda machine there in the back of the bay and was feeding in my money, when Griff came out of his office and headed my way. He was fishing in his pocket, hunting for coins and for a moment I hoped he really was just getting himself a soda, and his getting his while I was getting mine was just a coincidence.

I picked up my can of Dew and stepped to the side to make way for him, trying to think of something witty to say, but he never gave me the chance.

'So, how you doin', kid?' he asked and I could tell from the tone it wasn't just soda machine chit-chat. I debating pretending I took it for the normal 'fine, fine' junk that people say to each other on a day to day basis. The stuff that's mostly just noise to fill in the blank spots that nobody is really listening to. But I knew Griff, and I knew he wouldn't let me get away with it, so figured I might as well cut to the chase.

I opened my can and took a swallow, thinking about it. 'Over most of it but the embarrassment part,' I finally said and he couldn't help a snort.

'Only you, Maxwell,' he said with a shake of his head, 'would react to being taken hostage by getting embarrassed.'

Oh, I liked that one... hostage? Had I tried that one on for size yet? It was way less cheap romance novel sounding than 'kidnapped'.

'I'm mostly embarrassed by falling for their lame set up,' I grumbled, and ducked my head, thinking about another covering drink, but being just a can, it wasn't going to last long anyway.

He made a noise that was kind of a laugh, and kind of a dismissal, and then he turned toward his office. 'You know,' he said conversationally, sort of making me follow him since we obviously weren't done. 'I've been thinking I might have to fire you.'

I laughed. 'Who in the hell would you get to do your body work...' I began, but then felt something in the air, or saw something in his face that made me realize he wasn't really kidding. 'Wait... what?'

We stopped then, in the middle of the bay and he made me wait while he used the rag in his back pocket to clean the top of his soda. He stuffed the rag away, popped the top on the can and took a swallow. I just stood and stared at him, trying to think if I'd done anything overly stupid lately.

'Come on, Maxwell,' he finally said, looking me square in the face. 'This wasn't ever supposed to be anything but a stop gap for you; we both know that. What are you still doing here?'

I blinked at him and he just stood there looking at me. I blinked at him some more and he took a swallow from his can and I noted it was a Dr. Pepper. I thought about that perpetual rag in his back pocket and wondered about it... the man didn't work on anything but papers and a computer. He sighed heavily, obviously getting tired of waiting for me to think of something to say.

'Kid,' he said, parking his hands on his hips, can dangling precariously, 'You got more damn options than any one man should have... and changing oil all day ought to be the bottom of the list.'

I thought about making a joke about him giving me something to do that was more interesting, but I knew that wasn't what he meant. And he knew I knew that wasn't what he meant. I started to say something about loyalty, but it wouldn't quite come clear in my head, and seemed kind of lame anyway.

Griff finally got tired of my carp routine and just snorted in this way that was kind of disgusted and kind of amused. 'Look, Duo,' he said, and him using my name just made me shut my mouth and listen. 'You're a good employee. Hard worker. Conscientious as hell. Your work has been top notch since day one. And if you was a mechanic, I'd be offering you a raise to keep your ass here. But you're not. You don't belong here any more than Yuy would, or Commander Une.'

I think I managed to stutter out a couple of 'buts', and he just made that noise again, that sounded like he thought I didn't have two brain cells to rub together and then he walked back to his office. He stopped in the door and hollered back across the bay at me. 'Shit or get off the pot, Maxwell! Don't make me have to fire you!'

'Uh... sure thing, Boss-man,' I managed, but I barely heard it myself so I doubted even Mr. Superhearing caught it.

I took my soda and went back to work even though it was a half hour early.

Well then. On the plus side, it sure as hell gave me something else to think about besides a stupid ball game.

I wanted to be aggravated with him, but I wasn't sure if that was just because I'd rather than admit to any trepidation.

It's a fine line between comfortable and a rut, and I guess I could see what the man was trying to tell me. Well ok, I suppose there wasn't any 'try' about it; Griff doesn't exactly mince words.

Shit or get off the pot... not a lot of ways to interpret that. I tried to look back at my short, illustrious career with the Preventer organization and make up my mind if I'd really just been sitting here, or if there were valid reasons why I was still changing oil for a living.

The implication, of course, wasn't just that I was spinning my wheels going nowhere in particular, but that I was... hiding out. And that was the part I couldn't quite make up my mind about. It might have been true... I wasn't sure.

I run, I hide, but I never tell a lie.

I'd gotten over the not lying thing pretty early, and I was working on getting over the run thing. Had I not quite given up the hiding?

I was still chewing on it when it was time to go meet Heero at the ball field.

To be honest, I had wanted to run back home and pick him up, but it hadn't made a lot of sense for me to make the journey all the way out to our place and then all the way back in again. The Preventer building wasn't that darn far from the field.

Kind of wish I hadn't gotten there ahead of him though.

All the talk of previous years and games had conjured up visions of a ball field. Singular. What I was confronted with once I'd managed to find a place to park my car next to the other cars that were rather haphazardly lined up in the grass along the edge of what turned out to be an access road... was a bunch of ball fields. Interlocked in a weird way that had them pointing away from each other, presumably so that the balls would generally be going in not the same directions. It all seemed very chancy. And confusing.

There appeared to be a main area at the center of it all, with a couple of little cinder block buildings where the majority of the people were milling around, so I headed that way.

I figured out that the cinder block building was a restroom when I got close enough to see the 'men' sign on the side facing me, but I could see people going up to the left side and... consulting something, before wandering off with purpose. There was some sort of information to be found there, obviously, so I turned my feet that way.

What I found was a bulletin board that very handily informed me that the Preventers were playing the 8th District Fire and Rescue on 'diamond 3'. But even better, I found that the other side of the building was some sort of food stand thing. And there were people walking away from it with nifty bottles of sports drinks and soda. I went around to that side of the building, keeping my distance and trying to look like I hadn't just disembarked from the 'noob' boat, to get the lay of the land. The ordering process seemed to be rather chaotic until I realized there were different people for ordering different things. A man in a red ball cap seemed to be the go to guy if you just wanted a drink. A burly man with a ridiculous handlebar mustache seemed to be all about paper plates piled with chips covered in what appeared to be a... liquid cheese? Cheese sauce? A yellow cousin to the Blob? But he seemed fine with handing out drinks with the chips. There was a girl on the end in a Batman and Robin t-shirt who wasn't all that busy looking, so I couldn't quite figure out what her station was. Maybe she just backed up the other guys? Or maybe she was in charge? Whatever her focus was, she caught me looking, and waved me over with a wide grin.

'Don't be shy,' I was told. 'come on up here where you can see this wonderful cuisine better!'

There was a snort from Red, though he didn't even look her way. 'Erin, you know it's better if you don't look too close.'

She laughed, but didn't reply, just giving me another wave. I sighed and went; so much for easing in under the radar.

'I was just after a drink,' I explained, though damned if I know why I felt compelled to do so, 'and I wasn't sure of your system.'

She laughed out right. 'Like we have one!' There were chuckles all around, some from my side of the counter, like it was all some huge inside joke. I tried not to sigh again; there just didn't seem to be any help for pretending to not be out of my element.

'So,' I began, 'can I get a...'

'Wait!' she jumped in, cutting me off with up-raised hands. 'Let me guess! I'm good at this!'

There were a couple of chuckles, though the guy with the mustache rolled his eyes even while he was squirting yellow goop on another plate of chips. She ignored them and looked me up and down.

'You're certainly not over-weight,' she observed and I could feel a blush wanting to creep up the back of my neck. This... was weird. 'But I can tell you're a working man; not one of those exercise fanatics. Not a sports drink kind of guy, I don't think.'

'There's nothing wrong with Gatorade!' some guy tossed in to the middle of her spiel as he passed cash across to Red for a bottle of the same, but it seemed more amused than pissed. Erin gave him a wave as he walked away, but didn't respond. Just cocked her head the other way, as though the gesture would show her a different angle of my drink preferences.

'You strike me as particular about what you drink,' she continued and since there was a break on my side of the counter for a moment, Red and Mustache-guy were just standing there listening. Like they were really interested.

'Hey,' Red interjected suddenly. 'You get this one, and I'll stop messing up your candy bar arrangement.'

'Really?' Erin grinned, looking excited by the prospect.

'She likes them alphabetized,' Mustache explained.

'She's nuts,' Red added.

'Mt. Dew!' Erin blurted, jabbing a finger in the air in my general direction. 'And no fair ordering something else just to mess me up!'

I blinked at them and wondered just how damn boring it must get behind that counter. 'Uh... right?' I admitted.

'Well damn,' Red grumbled, managing to look annoyed and impressed all at once. 'That's five in a row, Prof. You win.'

'And a hot dog!' she added gleefully.

'Ah Jeez...' Red grumbled, looking embarrassed and suddenly seemed to have something he needed to do in the back of the little kitcheny thing. Mustache just snickered, but then he got another chip customer and went back to work.

'Huh?' I said brightly, starting to feel like my head was spinning.

'Obviously,' I was informed, 'this is your first ballgame. You have to have a hot dog. It's like... tradition. Everybody should eat a ballgame hotdog at least once in their life and so you might as well get it over with, see?'

‘Over with?’ I parroted. That sounded like it was akin to getting an immunization or something. Though most of my brain was stuck on the part where she could tell I’d never been to a game before. Was there a damn sign stuck on my shirt, or what?

‘Good selling technique there...’ Mustache muttered, but she ignored him.

‘But what style?’ she mused, giving me that up and down look again.

‘Uh... I don’t know?’ I confessed, and wondered if a tone was getting set for the whole damn evening.

Her eyes kind of lit up and I realized I’d just admitted I’d never eaten a hot dog before either. Maybe there really was a sign, but it just wasn’t on my shirt.

‘Where are you from?’ she wanted to know.

‘L2... I guess?’ I blurted and wanted to wince.

‘Simple then...’ she mused and was off to work. I wondered what this stop was going to end up costing me. And then I wondered why it had never dawned on me to argue.

Mustache gave me a sympathetic grin and handed me my bottle of Dew. I briefly considering just paying him and taking off, but... it seemed rude. And besides, Erin was back before I could do more than consider it anyway. I was handed something that I assumed was a hot dog wrapped up in a paper wrapper, charged ten freaking bucks, and just ended up feeling patted on the head.

‘Oh, Preventers are on three!’ Erin told me as I was turning away. ‘That’s to the right and down one. If you want something else, we’re always busiest between games, so come back about the sixth inning!’

‘Yeah,’ Red called out. ‘And we sell Alka-Seltzer too!’

Well, that was reassuring.

I smiled and I waved and I went to the right. I had a feeling it was going to be a long damn evening.

There was no sign of Heero or Wufei yet when I found the ball diamond with the big number three on it, but there were other people wandering about in Preventer’s colors. I hung back until I figured out which bench the Preventer team was going to occupy and then went to stake a claim on the bleachers on that side. The stupid things were made out of aluminum and vibrated unpleasantly every time somebody walked across them. Which, of course, they were constantly doing as people climbed up to take seats.

There were a few people setting up gear for both teams, but it didn’t look like many of the players for either side had shown up yet, so I settled down and unwrapped my hot dog while I waited for something to happen. I’m not a complete idiot, I’ve heard of hot dogs and I knew darn well they weren’t made out of dogs, but the one sitting in my lap did appear to be hot, so it was at least half as advertized. Erin had covered the thing with ketchup and mustard and sprinkled it liberally with onions and cheese. I had to wonder what in the hell else you could put on the damn things if this was her idea of ‘simple’.

Frankly, the thing didn’t look all that appealing, but it was there, and I’d paid a good chunk of money for it, and it would have looked really stupid to buy it just to throw it away, so... I tried to figure out how to take a bite. There was just no good way to eat the darn thing without dumping cheese and onions all over the place and I had a feeling I was going to be doing good if I didn’t end up wearing half of it.

In the end, I had to tilt my head at a weird angle and just hope for the best. For the record, it was not the worst thing I've ever tasted. Most of that list belongs to McMurphy.

'I see you fell victim to Ms Erin,' somebody chuckled and I looked up to find Giles standing beside the bleachers with a plate full of those weird chips.

'She's a serial hot-dogger?' I asked in mock surprise and Giles laughed a little louder than the joke warranted before climbing up to plop down next to me.

'All the proceeds from the concession stand go toward charity,' he explained. 'And she's good at it.'

Made me feel a little bit better about the money. The jury was still out on how I felt about the hot dog.

'Here,' Giles said, and handed me a napkin from the wad he had in his hand, 'you're going to need this.'

'Thanks,' I muttered and quickly wiped my mouth, just in case.

Out on the field, some guy in a white shirt was putting the bases in place and I couldn't help watching with interest. The things weren't at all what I had thought they'd be, and it surprised me to realize they were removable.

'Aww, you got a hot dog?' another familiar voice said, and I turned to find Dave standing in front of us, two plates of chips in his hands and a bottle of soda shoved under his arm. 'I got us chips!'

'Dude!' Giles chided, 'Without even checking first?'

'Well, it's his first game,' Dave grumbled. 'Ya gotta get the full experience!'

I totally had not known that food... or this close proximity to it... was so much a part of the baseball 'experience'.

Dave juggled the extra plate of chips onto my knees and took a seat in the row below us, setting his bottle between his feet and digging into his chips with a kind of twisted glee. 'I love these things!' he told nobody in particular.

Giles chuckled and rolled his eyes, but leaned over to warn me. 'If you're going to eat them, do it while they're still hot or they're just disgusting.'

I didn't have the heart to tell him they already looked pretty disgusting.

Over on the other team's bench a couple of big-ass looking guys showed up, and there was a good natured cheer from three or four people on the other end of the bleachers. The ball players mugged and hollered out some offers to sign autographs, which was met with some raspberries and mocking that led me to believe they were all related to one another. There's a certain tone of mocking that people will only take from people they grew up living with.

'Shove over,' I heard, and somebody poked me in the side. The burst of irritation vanished when I turned to poke back and found Trowa preparing to climb up the side of the bleachers. Giles and I dutifully slid over, and Trowa made himself a spot where there hadn't been one, and promptly divested me of my plate of chips.

'Where's Quatre?' I asked, noting that he hadn't made me move over far enough to make room for two.

'India, I think,' he said and popped a chip into his mouth just before he dripped blobby stuff all over his chin. I watched him chew with the vague sense of a guilty pleasure being indulged in, finally said the hell with it, and took one of the stupid chips for myself.

It was kind of like... something pretending to be cheese with a side of salt. Only crunchy.

'You *think*?' Giles asked, leaning around me to look at Trowa funny, and I could tell they kind of knew each other. Which was a whole new type of weird. But then, I suppose it stood to reason, there had been a vague understanding that all of these people made a habit of coming out to the ball games. I'd just never stopped to think about the implications before.

'Or China, I can't remember if he said,' Trowa explained without really explaining.

Dave twisted around to look at us, his chips already mostly gone. 'Isn't that kind of... an important thing to know?'

Trowa just smiled that Mona Lisa smile he has sometimes, the one that sort of makes you feel like you're being his personal straight man on purpose. 'Not really. Either way, he'll be home in time for a late supper.'

Giles snorted derisively and turned back to his own paper plate with a shake of his head. 'You guys are from an entirely different walk of life.'

There was a lull for a minute while we all sat around and munched on various things. There were a couple of guys in Preventers gear out on the field tossing a ball back and forth. I wondered if they were agents or office staff or just what.

I kind of wanted to feel guilty about not knowing, but it wouldn't really solidify into a real feeling. Kind of... the ghost of a feeling I vaguely thought I ought to feel.

Or something. Guess it's just as well; there really wasn't any room on the bleachers for a guilt beast.

Though every hamster I owned was lined up against the fence, little furry faces pressed between the wires, watching everything with avid interest. Guess I needed to get them out more often... they were obviously getting bored. George waved a 'damn' banner and pointed toward the 8th's bench, and I glanced over to see a couple more of their players show up.

'Jeez,' I muttered, agreeing with the assessment of my expletive hamster. 'They've got some damn big guys.'

'Size ain't everything,' Dave grumbled, and every guy within hearing range snickered like a twelve year old.

Dave, rather predictably, took offense. 'Hey!' he said, turning around to glare at the lot of us. 'Our guys may not be as big, but they're fast!'

'Dude!' Giles chortled, damn near falling over in his efforts to ridicule, 'you're not makin' it better!'

Dave just got red in the face and looked like he was really working up to a rant that would probably have just ended up giving Giles more fodder, but there was suddenly a group of women in front of our boy's party, and everybody kind of shut up.

And right in the middle of that group stood Sally Po, looking somehow like the ring-leader or the team captain. She gave me a grin that was decidedly wicked and snapped out a completely imaginary, but otherwise quite ornate lady's fan.

'Do my eyes deceive me?' she said, all thick southern drawl, fanning herself lazily. 'Duo Maxwell? Why... I thought I'd never live to see the day!'

I opened my mouth to meet the attack with a parry and quick riposte... you have to keep Ms Po on her toes to survive a verbal match... but before I could utter a sound, Dave blundered into the middle of the Salle.

‘Hey!’ he said, voice full of indignation, ‘Don’t be picking on Duo!’

It was like one of those cartoon moments where the needle jerks across the record and everything freezes. There’s usually an audible blink from somebody? Yeah... like that. Even Sally’s fan stilled.

Trowa deftly derailed the awkward before it had a chance to get too weird.

‘Yeah, you big bully,’ he grinned and very deliberately popped a chip into his mouth.

‘Oh God,’ Sally said, all theatrically aghast. ‘I gave you more chip credit than to eat that crap, Barton!’

But that just poked Dave again and he gave up defending me in order to defend his favorite snack. It ended with Sally’s second in command, a lady with weird horns fastened on her hat, patting Dave on the head and heading up the bleachers. The rest of the entourage followed suit, all of them having to pat Dave as they finally trouped by us to climb up and line up along the top row.

I had apparently been the owner of the audible blink though, and continued to just sit there staring at the back of Dave’s head, thinking about the seating arrangements and how I was ringed about on all sides. Was that... on purpose? Were the guys deliberately trying to... what? Protect me? Buffer me? And what did that imply? Had I really come off like I was *afraid* to come out to the stupid ball game?

Somewhere in the back of my head that thought tried to connect with my conversation with Griff, but Giles elbowed me about then and the link didn’t happen.

‘Yuy and Chang are here,’ he grunted and I turned to see the guys setting up their stuff on an open spot on the bench. Heero had been looking for me, and he smiled widely when I met his eyes, giving me a nod. He said something that made Wufei turn and look my way as well. Despite all Heero’s reassurances, I still found myself almost holding my breath and watching him intently for any sign he was unhappy to see me, but the broad grin was instant. He even waved. I spent a couple of minutes feeling stupid before I let myself just feel relieved.

Funny how some things can grow inside your head until your mole hills are not just mountains, they’re mountains of such epic proportions they can crush reality like last week’s stale crackers under their ponderous weight.

Or maybe that’s just me.

I waved back.

‘You going to eat that hot dog, or just sit there holding it?’ Trowa wanted to know, and it brought my attention back from the edge of thinking about things that were probably best left unthought. Like the state I’d been in last season.

‘I suppose I probably should,’ I said, looking down at the thing. ‘Considering what I paid for it.’

Trowa just laughed at me in a way that made me sure he’d met Ms Erin before. Around me, everybody was passing their trash down to Dave, so I took the last few bites, passing mine off too. He dutifully trekked it over to the trash barrel, stopping to exchange a few words with Heero through the fence. I’ll be honest and admit it made me a little bit nervous, wondering what the topic was.

Somewhere in the distance behind us, there was a cheer and I assumed one of the other pairs of teams had started to play. I caught Giles checking his watch with a faint frown and realized the game should have started. I was just opening my mouth to ask, when a guy in a black polo shirt came jogging up carrying a weird face mask and there was a good natured cheer from just about everybody in the area, both on the bench and on the bleachers. The guy grinned widely and sketched a theatric bow before pulling a little duster thing out of his hip pocket, giving the home plate a quick brushing, and then loudly proclaiming, 'Let's play ball!'

There was another rousing cheer and a good portion of the people on the bleachers stamped their feet in rhythm on the steps, causing that creepy vibration up through my butt. I certainly hoped that wasn't going to be an ongoing thing through the whole game.

And then they proceeded to play ball. I'm not going to go into a play-by-play, I'm sure most everybody who isn't me knows how it works and has probably seen their fair share of games. Though I have to admit it was half way through the second inning before I realized that Heero and Wufei were both holding back. Wufei had hit one that went by the second baseman and bounced out into right field, easily making it to first base. But if you were paying any attention at all, you could see how he'd choked back on his swing; the hit could have been a home run, easily. I opened my mouth to say something to Trowa about it, but then remembered my lost piloting days and faking the use of a computer for course calculations when other people were around. Guess there wasn't any point in asking a question I already knew the answer to. Trowa could see the aborted comment though, and just grinned.

'Wouldn't take long before nobody would play against them,' he said softly and I smiled back, perfectly able to imagine it. If every hit they made was a home run, and every ball that came to their side of the field was caught? Not to mention it can kind of demoralize the people on your side... make them feel a whole lot of superfluous, and that just builds resentment. Oh yeah; been there, lived through that.

Out on the field, something happened with the ball and Wufei suddenly took off running for second base. People were yelling and pointing, the ball was hurled that way, and Wufei did that slide thing that Dave had taught me. The guy in the black shirt was running across the field, presumably to be close enough to see what was going on, and when the dust cleared he hollered, 'Safe!' Wufei got up, dusting himself off and looking smug.

Behind us, horn girl screamed, 'Go, Chang!' at the top of her lungs. Turning to look back at her, I was just in time to see the whole row of them do this weird thing where they stood up and sat down one after the other along the line. It gave this really weird rippling affect that was kind of cool, though they were all laughing so hard I don't know how they got it coordinated. I turned back to find Wufei, and couldn't make up my mind from the expression on his face if he was mortified or pleased. He seemed to be grinning in a way that kind of said he was ok with the display, but I have to say... I'd never seen him quite that shade of red before.

'What the hell just happened?' I asked nobody in particular and Trowa chuckled.

'Which part?'

'Chang just stole second,' Giles explained.

‘You can do that?’ It seemed like a strange concept. Sort of invited chaos, if you asked me.

‘Only under certain circumstances,’ Trowa supplied.

‘And that thing the ladies did... what the hell was that all about?’

‘It’s called a wave,’ Dave said, turning around to join the conversation. ‘It kinda looks more impressive when a whole stadium does it.’

I tried to imagine that and wondered how you got that many people to cooperate. It would be kind of neat looking, almost like wind across water if you could...

‘That ain’t fair,’ Dave said, kind of cutting across my thoughts and leaving me doing that blinking thing again.

‘What?’ Giles asked before anybody else had to, and Dave turned completely around to look back at us rather earnestly.

‘They’re just trying to influence the vote,’ he said, keeping his voice low like it was some sort of conspiracy and nobody else had realized whatever it was he thought he had realized.

‘Huh?’ I said brightly, and Trowa leaned in to whisper to me.

‘That Most Valuable Player thing,’ he said, and I realized he was just messing with Dave, because that was kind of a ‘no duh?’ sort of epiphany. A non-epiphany, if you will.

‘So?’ Giles asked, just to see where Dave would go with it, I think.

Sure as hell didn’t go anywhere near where I thought he was going.

‘We gotta match that for Yuy!’ he proclaimed. At least I wasn’t the only one left blinking that time.

‘Uh, Dave,’ Giles said gently, as though he were talking to a very young child.

‘There’s four of us... that will look beyond stupid.’

Before I had a chance to object, or leave, or crawl under the bleachers, Dave had turned to another group of Preventer people on down the bleachers and somehow managed to convince them to come sit with us. And damned if the next time Heero was up at bat, I participated in my very first ever sports venue ‘wave’. It helped that Trowa was laughing so hard I thought he was going to choke.

Helped too that Heero ended up wearing that same expression Wufei had worn. Beet red, but grinning, so I hoped to God he wasn’t pissed.

But you know, along about then was when I started to ‘get it’. Sure as hell wasn’t anything I was going to do just sitting there, that was going to be any more embarrassing than that had been. So I guess I kind of forgot about being up-tight, and somehow it got to be more fun after that.

And along about the fifth inning, when one of the other Preventer guys hit a triple, we got our whole end of the bleachers to do the wave again.

I had never gotten that whole ‘we’ thing before when anybody had talked about the ball season. ‘*When do we play next?*’ and ‘*We won last night!*’ had always seemed kind of... presumptuous. Almost like whoever was talking was implying they were actually on the team themselves. I had always kind of felt like correcting them and pointing out that ‘they’ hadn’t done jack shit, but... I felt it then. I understood it then.

There was an energy on that ball field that somehow we were a part of. Like... the louder and more vocal we were, the harder the guys played. In fact, that next time Heero’s turn came around again, he hit a home run and when he got back to the bench

after running the bases, there was a funny little exchange with Wufei that made me think he hadn't meant to do that.

Or maybe they were just commiserating with each other over the new 'wave' thing, because you know damn well Dave made us do it again.

We ended up winning six to three. The last catch was made, a whoop went up from the bleachers, and we did the wave one last time. Out on the field the two teams lined up and did this weird thing where the two rows walked past each other and they all shook hands. Our team went and clustered around the pitcher's mound afterward while the coach said a few words of some sort. Then there was a group high five and it was all over.

The crowd dispersed pretty quickly the minute the umpire had called the winner, and I found myself standing by the fence contemplating a long drive home alone. It was oddly unattractive after the time spent with the group. But then one of the guy's from the team walked by on his way to the concession stand and said, 'Hey, you're Duo, right?'

'Yeah?' I replied and he grinned.

'Yuy says not to leave without him, he needs a ride.'

I thanked him and he went on his way, message delivered. I really needed to make an effort to learn who these people were. They were all Heero's teammates after all, which implied a certain amount of friendship. I wondered if it was a workplace sort of friendship, or if it was a cook-out at Bob's house on Sunday sort of friendship. Should we be buying a grill?

I glanced after the messenger guy with a sudden pang of guilt. I should have asked for his name. Should have done a proper introduction. I'd missed an opportunity there, and it made me feel foolish. I had *some* social graces; where the hell had they all gone? This was a decently big part of Heero's life. I was pretty much married to the guy. I really should make more of an effort. Made me wonder... had all that time shying away from being an intrusion created a blind spot? Was I still shying?

Or... maybe just one game was a little soon to make that call.

When Heero had his gear gathered together and finally came walking across the diamond, I fell into step with him and we headed for the car. 'How did you get here if you didn't drive?' I had to ask, and I couldn't tell if the look I got was maybe a little bit sheepish.

'Wufei came by the house and picked me up,' he said, though I couldn't imagine why Wufei would have been in our neck of the woods in the first place. It made me wonder if Heero had called him out just so we could drive home together, so I ended up not asking.

'Nice homer, fly-boy. You mean to do that?' I asked him instead.

'You could tell?'

I snorted. 'It didn't take long to see you and Wufei were both holding back.'

He chuckled softly and damned if a faint blush didn't rise to his face. 'I got a little bit carried away. It was... nice having you here.'

I hadn't been expecting the comment, and it was my turn to blush. Kind of derailed the conversation too, but when I missed my turn, Heero picked up the slack.

'So, what do you want to do about dinner?'

'Uh... skip it?' I tried, feeling a little guilty for all the crap I'd just ingested. 'I somehow got coerced into a concession stand feeding frenzy.'

I got the raised eyebrow look for a second, but then he just smiled. ‘Erin got you?’

‘It was for charity,’ I deadpanned and he laughed out right.

‘Might as well get one for myself then, and we’ll call it a night.’ He gave me a nudge and we altered course for the concession stand. I couldn’t help the double take and he grinned at me.

‘We’re here already,’ he explained, but then added, ‘and it’s for charity... right?’

‘I was railroaded,’ I muttered as we walked up to the counter. Heero never answered because Erin greeted him as soon as she set eyes on us.

‘Great hit, Heero!’ she enthused. ‘You want your usual?’

‘Yes, please,’ he replied, looking just a touch uncomfortable. ‘And thanks.’

Erin bustled off and I took the moment to stare at Heero. ‘You have a usual at a ball field concession stand?’

Heero’s vaguely uncomfortable look eased over into something flirting with embarrassment. ‘Well, we’re here a lot...’ he began, but allowed Red handing him a bottle of water to interrupt the thought. I just grinned at him and waited to see what was ‘usual’ for Heero Yuy. Who would have thought? I started to say something addressed to the nutrition nazi in him, but then thought better of it. If this was something he enjoyed, I certainly didn’t want to make him feel funny about it.

Erin arrived back with a familiar object wrapped in paper and happily took Heero’s money. He was carrying his glove, bat and bottle of water, so when she handed over the hot dog, I reached for it and she seemed to notice for the first time that we were together.

‘Hey!’ she grinned at me, ‘so what did you think of your first ball game hot dog?’

‘It was... interesting,’ I hedged, cringing inwardly at the less than stellar wording, but she only grinned wider.

‘Heero,’ she suddenly admonished, looking from me, to the hot dog in my hand, to him. ‘You are a rotten date! Aren’t you even going to feed him?’

I’d have blushed furiously if she’d have given me the time, but she was already gone after my non-order. I felt kind of dumb just blinking at empty air, so I turned to blink at Heero instead. ‘Uh... she did it again.’

He sighed and gave a little one shouldered shrug of apology. ‘Well... it is supposed to be our dinner...’

I had to just about bite my tongue off, trying not to object strenuously, when she came back with a freaking sack. The look on my face must have been enough to convey the thought though, because I got pished and laughed at.

‘This is on the house, sweetie,’ she told me, leaning across the counter to pluck Heero’s hot dog out of my hand and bag it with the rest of our dinner before handing me the whole thing. ‘For being such a good sport before.’ Then her smile took on this weird kind of maternal thing and I got a little wink. ‘You know... everybody has to have a first ball game or a first hot dog at some point. No reason at all to feel embarrassed about it.’

I wasn’t sure whether to thank her or scuff my feet in the dirt, but another victim crossed her line of sight and I was forgotten as she and Red began a tag-team effort to sell some poor sap a plate of those chips and a hot dog to boot. We used the moment to exit, stage right.

‘So what’d you think?’ Heero asked as we made our way toward the car.

‘Weird?’ I blurted before I had much chance to think about it. I kind of understand how that word association thing can trip you up.

But Heero just laughed. ‘Is that your favorite word, or what?’

It made me stop and think, kind of detouring the topic onto a completely different track. ‘I do use it a lot, don’t I? At least... since coming to live dirtside.’

Because, you know, everything about dirtside was kind of weird. Weather and bugs and timetables and neighbor kids and possums and just all of it. I was getting used to a lot, but that didn’t make it any less weird.

Several people called out to Heero to congratulate him on the win as we made our way across the field, and we were in the car doling out the eats before I quite realized it. Erin had packed another Mt. Dew in with the hot dogs, along with a couple of little bags of chips and a candy bar. A full meal, I suppose, if you squinted and kind of looked at it sideways. Probably not any worse than some of the other meals we’d had since starting down the road of kitchen renovation. Another thing to add to the list of weirdness; you certainly couldn’t remodel a ship. Repaint, maybe, or add amenities, but a bulk head was a bulk head and you just didn’t go around making major structural changes.

‘Duo,’ Heero said, a kind of careful gentleness to his tone, ‘did you really have that bad a time?’

‘What?’ I said, looking up at him sharply. ‘No! It was fun! Well... most of it. That wave thing was kind of embarrassing at first, but the rest was good. Why? What makes you think I had a bad time?’

I realized he’d been sitting there kind of watching me, and I think he realized that I realized, so he went back to unwrapping his dinner. ‘You’re awfully quiet.’

The line of cars trying to get the hell out of Dodge meant there was no real hurry; we weren’t going anywhere for a bit, so I unwrapped my hot dog too. I was surprised to find it plain, and thought that might actually make the thing more palatable.

‘I’m sorry; just thinking I guess,’ I told him, and kind of felt like that needed more clarification. Thinking could mean a lot, and not necessarily in a good way. ‘That guy you sent to tell me not to leave... who was that?’

‘Thorpe,’ he told me, looking at me quizzically. ‘Plays left field.’

‘He another agent?’ I asked, trying to fit the guy into the framework of our work life. Heero’s work life.

‘Janitorial staff,’ he corrected and I took a moment to peer over at his hot dog to find out what his ‘usual’ was. Just a dusting of shredded cheese and lettuce of all things. Should have known Heero would try to make it somehow nutritionally balanced.

‘Are there team... things?’ I asked, catching him in mid bite, and I had to wait while he chewed and swallowed.

‘Things?’ he prompted.

‘You know... cookouts and group stuff?’

I could see him struggling to follow my leap-frog thinking, but he finally sighed and admitted, ‘You’ve lost me.’

I studiously bent to opening my bag of chips so I didn’t have to meet his gaze while I confessed. ‘Ok... look, I’m worried that you’re skipping out on some of the team social stuff because of me. You guys are a team, aren’t there... group things?’

He actually snorted derisively, ‘God, no!’ he blurted and then managed to look a little embarrassed. ‘I mean, they’re great guys and all, but we get more than enough

togetherness during the season. There might be a pizza party or something if we win the league, but... no.'

'Oh,' I said and couldn't decide if that was a relief or if that was maybe a little sad. Kind of tarnished the whole 'team' image, quite frankly.

There was a beep of a horn and I glanced up to see that the line of exiting traffic had paused because somebody was letting us out. I popped the car into gear and let Heero wave our thanks, pulling quickly out into the stream.

We drove in silence for a bit, inching along with the other cars down the access road waiting our turn to pull out onto the actual road. I quickly finished my dinner while we were still creeping along at a walking pace, deciding that if I were to have a 'usual' at a hot dog stand, it would be plain. Thing was actually not all that bad without all the crap on it.

But my thoughts were still chasing after each other and I couldn't quite let go of a couple of them. 'Heero?' I heard myself suddenly ask, 'why in the hell am I still working in the motor pool?'

From Heero's side of the car there was a lack of response that was more quiet than silent. I risked a glance that way and found a funny little look on his face that was kind of melancholy and kind of pleased and kind of... not so much.

He took a slow drink from his water while, I suspect, he formulated some response, so I reached for the soda I hadn't really intended to drink and did the same.

Yeah; a whole lot of not much being said there. Guess he didn't have a clue either. I decided to save him from having to work through the etiquette of that kind of reply.

'Am I really just hiding out?' I asked, taking a swallow of my drink and capping the bottle before settling it back between my thighs.

Beside me there was the sound of a slowly let out breath. 'Duo... what brought this all on?'

I opened my mouth to tell him about the conversation with Griff, but then thought that was perhaps not the brightest thing I could do for the health of my boss. One thing for Heero to think his little fledgling had climbed up on the side of the nest all by himself, quite another for him to realize I'd had the edge of the nest pointed out to me. And was about to be kicked off it.

'Lot of things,' I lied, and then thought again and realized I wasn't really lying. That moment on the bleachers when I'd had the weird feeling (I really do just love that word, don't I?) that the guys were arranged around me as a buffer, was kind of part of it.

Heero was doing his own deliberating I think, from the time it was taking him to form his answers, so I was kind of expecting one of those carefully worded nothing lines. One of those ones that just tosses back at you things you'd already said, only in a slightly different format? Surprised me when he said, 'You needed some time and some stability to find your ground again.'

Kind of cemented in my mind the theory that he'd strong-armed the Preventers into giving me that job. I knew how Heero was about things he felt I needed. Not that I was going to ask. But getting around that point and on to a point that could be verbalized must have taken me too long.

'Duo,' he asked carefully, 'Are you thinking about quitting?'

I mulled at that, and supposed it was the obvious conclusion after the previous epiphanic realization. I did manage to bite my tongue on the 'two steps ahead of being fired' comment. 'Maybe?' I hedged, but then had to admit to being a little bit more on the positive side of that. 'I guess... maybe it's getting to be time?'

'You don't sound like you want to,' he was quick to point out, and I stalled with another swallow of my soda because I had to kind of think about that. Well, think about that some more. Sort of what I'd been doing all afternoon, and pretty much why we were having this conversation in the first place.

'I guess I'm just having trouble visualizing the what comes next part, is all,' I said, and he appeared to be doing his own stalling, because he suddenly decided he needed to gather together all the dinner trash and stuff it in the now empty sack.

'You know I'll support whatever you decide,' he finally told me, though he certainly didn't have to... it was a thing he'd told me before. On several occasions.

'That would probably be easier if I'd actually decide something, huh?' I grinned and he let out with a dry little chuckle.

'There's no rush,' he soothed and I left him that fantasy. He didn't need to know I was on Griff's timetable now.

Was that part of what was eating at me? I always have had problems with being told what to do; been a rebel since day one. Maybe it was just some knee jerk habit that was making me resist taking a step that was probably in my best interest just because somebody else had presented the idea to me, instead of me making the decision on my own.

It's not like my mechanic's salary was so screamingly awesome that I couldn't afford to walk away from it. Mr. Lee had demonstrated with that last job, that I had other options that would compensate me better than busting my knuckles all day. Though that art gig wasn't exactly what you'd call steady. Maybe it was more the lure of the reliable paycheck?

Now that I thought about it, art commissions were a damn lot like running salvage had been; you had your windfalls, and you had your lean times. The trick had always been working the angles and stacking the jobs; bringing in the most profit while minimizing the expenses. Sometimes it had been exciting and sometimes it had been nerve wracking and I guess maybe, looking back, I could kind of admit that I really didn't miss the nerve wracking parts.

Funny though... Heero had said I needed stability. But that's not really something I'd ever had before. There wasn't any aspect of my childhood that could exactly be called constant. And I'd moved straight from there into that whole Gundam pilot thing, which was probably the heart and soul of instability. And then on to salvage work. Maybe by the time Heero'd plopped me down in the motor pool, I'd been more than ready for something that required a little less fancy footwork. A little less adrenaline.

And maybe that's what was making this jump so hard to take; I think I kind of liked stable.

I glanced across at Heero and couldn't help a smile. If there was any steadiness in my life, it was sitting right next to me.

'There's no rush,' I agreed, 'but I think I'm ready to start thinking about it.'

The comment got me that strange little smile again, the one that couldn't seem to decide if it was pleased, or if it was sad.

‘Guess it’s time I figured out what I want to be when I grow up,’ I chuckled, and tried on a couple of titles in my head. If I wasn’t going to be a mechanic, and the whole Sketch Artist thing wouldn’t have been a full time gig anyway, did that leave me with Artist by default? Not steady, but potentially profitable. Though that brought on another thought and I glanced across at Heero again, catching him with that faint line between his brows that he gets sometimes, and his mouth open working with words. I didn’t figure it was going to be anything that really needed to be said, so went ahead with my thought; ‘Crap, Heero... will you be able to carry me on your insurance?’

It made him blink, the faint line getting more pronounced and driving off whatever he’d been about to say. ‘I think so. Though... we’ll have to do something a little bit more official.’

That would be good, because if there was anybody in the Earth Sphere who needed health insurance, it was yours truly. Though... half my damn wardrobe was full of crap with the Preventer logo on it; guess I’d be turning all that in. But wow... I could stop living life based entirely on what time the clock said, that would be kind of nice. Though, I’d miss the drive in to work with Heero; it had sort of grown into a companionable time.

Beside me, there was the sound of a heavy, slightly frustrated sigh.

‘What?’ I asked, though traffic had picked up and I couldn’t really look at him to gage what was going on in his head.

‘Could you slow down a little, please?’ he asked, his tone giving me another hint of frustration. My foot came off the gas, but when I glanced down at the speedometer, I was only doing the speed limit.

‘Not your driving,’ Heero corrected, ‘your thinking.’

I flashed a grin that I hoped he caught in profile. ‘Sorry.’

‘You just went from *maybe* to plotting your resignation letter in less than two seconds.’

Resignation letter? I wondered if I actually had to produce one since I’d sort of been told I was going to resign. That would suck. Maybe I’d make Griff write it for me.

‘I guess I just accepted the inevitable,’ I said, trying to follow my leap-frog thinking back to the moment when I had done so, and not really being able to see it. We’d left the highway and with the lightened traffic, I took the opportunity for another swallow of soda and was surprised to find it was the last of it. I held the empty bottle out so that Heero could stuff it in the sack with the rest of the trash. There was a sigh of a different tone than I’d been getting.

‘Duo,’ he asked carefully, ‘just how many of these have you had to drink today?’

‘Huh?’ I said brightly. ‘Uhm... I dunno? Three, I guess?’ Though it was more like three and a half since my lunch had come with a drink. I don’t really like the Coke products that the Andover carries, but I usually drank some of it before getting my own drink afterward. So yeah... half a cup of Coke, a can and two bottles of Mt. Dew. Oooops?

‘Certainly explains your... level of twitchiness,’ he said drily.

‘Sorry,’ I muttered, feeling just a little bit embarrassed by the excess. ‘I really didn’t mean to drink that last one.’

He let it go; I suspect he'd finally picked up on how his tendency to nag at my vices firmly poked my tendency to get rebellious about it. 'So,' he said instead, 'you're really planning on quitting?'

Driving through a residential area, I was able to look over at him, worried that he was upset by the notion, but all I could see was a thoughtful expression. 'Unless you mind?'

He snorted. 'Of course not.'

Under the 'shit or get off the pot' circumstances... that was good.

'It's just kind of scary,' I admitted to the both of us. 'I still have trouble believing this whole 'art' thing can really pan out. I can't help feeling like I need a day job.'

I was kind of caught by surprise when he burst out with a laugh. He cut it off pretty quickly, and I don't think he'd intended it at all. 'After that check you got from Mr. Lee? Duo, that job didn't take you more than a week and you brought in more money than you could have made in months at that *day job*. I cannot believe that you still do not understand how talented you are.'

The comment just made me squirm, and since we had arrived in front of our house, I was able to ignore it while we parked and got out of the car.

I gathered the trash, Heero gathered his gear and we went in the house with the subject pretty much dropped. Especially once we were inside and I remembered that there had been workers in our house all day and that (hopefully) progress had been made.

'Oh wow,' I said, when the lights had been flipped on, 'it's actually starting to look like a kitchen again!'

And even better, the refrigerator was no longer sitting in the middle of the room, but was in its new home. Most of the cabinets were actually in place, though they still looked almost skeletal without the countertop to hide the guts and framework. But the form of the whole thing was really starting to show. I was pleased to decide that the new layout was not going to suck.

'The manager said the counters should be here tomorrow and the sink will be ready before the end of the week,' Heero informed me with just the vaguest hint of a self-satisfied tone. I wondered again just what he'd threatened them with, but wasn't sure I wanted to know.

'They could actually be done and the hell out of here this week,' I said, probably pretty unnecessarily. But it was a thought that was really damned attractive and I couldn't quite help voicing it. No more Larry and Darryl in my house all day. No more burnt vacation days for Heero. No more sawdust and paint fumes. No more clutter of tools and crap everywhere.

Normal again. Which would be like... Nirvana. Homeowner Nirvana.

'I can not wait,' Heero muttered and we just stood there looking around at our 'getting there' kitchen for a minute, basking in the glow of almost there.

Heero broke the moment first, seeming to shake it off like he didn't want to get too used to the idea in case something else went wrong. 'I'm going to start a load of laundry; I'm going to need my ball clothes again before the end of the week.'

'Hang on and let me grab what's up in the laundry basket,' I said and headed up to do just that. I shucked what I was wearing into the pile and then tossed it all down the stairs to Heero. He'd already done his own shucking and while the laundry did get started, what came after was probably pretty predictable.

And probably just as predictable, but somehow I hadn't... was finding myself wide awake and staring at the ceiling afterward. Heero'd dropped off almost immediately and was sleeping the sleep of the dead beside me, but I was suffering the consequences of partaking in excess from the caffeine pool. There was certainly no danger, but I definitely had a buzz.

I gave it up for a lost cause pretty quickly and slipped back out of bed, taking the clothes I'd laid out for the next day, and padding silently out of the room.

I had a feeling it was going to be a long night.

I briefly considered soaking in a hot bath, but really... nothing was going to cure my current state other than time. Besides, my running bathwater at that hour would probably have disturbed Heero. So instead I went down to see if there was anything worth watching on late night television with the sound turned off. I managed about twenty minutes of something that involved dragging what appeared to be vampires out into the sunlight where they combusted in an impressive manner, before I couldn't sit still anymore.

It crossed my mind to go for a jog, but... well, we'd already demonstrated that physical activity wasn't going to burn this twitchiness off. And it probably would have just alarmed the neighbors if anybody noticed me.

I wandered into the kitchen, having to turn the light on to make sure I didn't plow into anything, and found myself standing in front of the fridge suddenly aware I was pretty damn thirsty.

The bottle of soda was uncapped and I'd actually taken a swallow before it trickled up to my conscious brain that it was probably a pretty bad idea.

'Ya think?' Solo snorted, sitting somewhere behind me on a counter that wasn't there yet. 'Really?'

'Shut up, smartass,' I muttered and put the bottle back, trading it for a couple of gulps from the water pitcher.

'And here I thought ya was a bright kid, back in the day,' he drawled, slipping off the counter-that-wasn't to follow me as I stalked back out of the room. 'Who'da thought you'd grow up all stupid?'

I ignored him, making my way out to my studio, turning the lights out behind me as I went, so that I could sit on the counter in the dark and look out into the back yard. Wasn't much to see; a few faint stars and the shadowy fronds of the willow blowing gently in the night air. I just sat for a bit, feeling the slightly increased thump of my heart, trying vaguely to slow it down, and of course not being able to.

So, ok... maybe it was time to admit that the soda thing might be something of an addiction. And maybe it was time I stopped being stubborn for the sake of stubbornness and started thinking about giving the crap up. There was certainly enough evidence that it wasn't exactly a health food.

'No shit, Sherlock,' Solo laughed, having settled on the couch with his feet up on the arm, his own arms behind his head, annoying smirk firmly in place. 'Hey, Rat-boy? Who the hell is Sherlock anyway?'

I blinked at the change of topic, kind of surprised that he wasn't going to harp on the soda thing more, but then I guess he should understand my rebellious streak even better than Heero, since I'd probably learned it from him.

‘Really old character from a book,’ I told him absently. ‘Sherlock Holmes. Detective type of stuff.’

‘How come you never read it to me?’ he asked and I began to make a retort about how I never read him shit, but I suppose anything I read, he read by default. Living, the way he did, in my head.

‘Maybe I will,’ I said, reflecting that it would probably be just the sort of thing to send off to the kids when I was done. I needed to do some research on bookstores in the area; most of the ones I used to frequent were on various colonies. On-line ordering is fine, but I kind of like to get my hands on certain things before I bought. Feel the heft. Riffle the pages. Peek inside. Toria had tried to talk me into electronic reading more than once, but it’s just not the same thing at all.

I got up to go get my laptop, wondering about book stores and the differences between second hand and antiques. Collectible and just old. But I was pretty sure I’d left it in the study, and the thought of making the trek back up the stairs without disturbing Heero wasn’t all that attractive. That left me standing in the middle of the room in the dark.

‘Wish ya’d settle the hell down,’ Solo muttered. ‘Yer wearin’ me out.’

It made me start to apologize, which was just stupid, so I went and turned on the lights, grabbed a sketch pad and threw myself down on the couch, making him disappear.

‘Jerk,’ he said from nowhere.

‘Asshole,’ I replied.

Really, if I was going to be sitting up half the night coming down off a caffeine high, there were other things besides pre-colony fiction that needed my attention, fractured as it was.

I had agreed to a commission that I still had not a clue how to go about filling, and if I was contemplating leaving that stable mechanic’s paycheck behind... I could not afford to screw this up.

Not to even mention letting Wufei down.

Or failing Aleyah.

I flipped to a blank page and put a pencil against it, waiting with bated breath for something to happen.

Or... you know... having to hear Stan Kirby say ‘I told you so’ in that God damn disdainful tone of voice of his.

‘He’s a jerk too,’ Solo supplied from the ether, sounding like he was yawning around the words.

I just snorted, staring at the blank sheet until I was seeing the grain of the damn paper. And not much else.

I wondered if there existed anywhere in the known universe, a list of the names of the people who died on that colony?

I decided that I would sketch Master Long, since nothing else was coming to mind, just to completely exorcise the idea. I’d recognized it as a bad one, Solo had agreed with me, but it somehow still occupied that place in my brain where ideas were born. I needed to kick it out and move on. Because there needed to be an idea here that didn’t suck. And soon.

I kept thinking about the notion of a list of names. Could there possibly be one somewhere? And how the hell long could it be? I don’t think I could get my head around

the numbers even if I knew them. And it shouldn't be numbers. L5 was not about statistics. That was the whole point here. My job was to make this human. To help other people get their heads around a thing so huge I couldn't get my own head around it. Sure... no problem.

I really, really wanted to go back to the kitchen and get that bottle of soda.

On the page under my hand Master Long stared up at me, looking confused by that thought. Stared up with his little froggy eyes, his little webbed hands sticking out of robes that were pooled around his squat little froggy body, sitting on his little froggy lily pad.

Ok... idea completely and totally exorcised.

Solo just about hurt himself laughing.

I flipped the page and moved on.

There was a monument in the distant past, for a war that America involved itself in. A tiny war, really, in the grand scheme of the history that man had made since then. At the time, though, it had been one of the most devastating, dragging out for decades. I'd seen pictures of the monument though, and it had stuck with me. Might still be there, for all I knew. If I remembered right, there had been over fifty thousand names on that wall, and I couldn't help wondering how that compared to the tragedy of L5.

I'd only seen photographs of The Wall, but... damn thing had moved me to tears anyway. It was a profound thing, doing what I wanted to do in the simplest of ways. Making it real. Giving it perspective. What if there was a list somewhere? What if the names were there for the finding?

On the paper, I did that vanishing point thing and made a wall that could have been a mile long. How many miles would it take to list all the names of all the people who died when that button was pushed?

And... just how portable would *that* be?

Oh yeah. I had guidelines here, didn't I? And something the size of a small town was not exactly portable. And this wasn't supposed to be a remembrance so much as a message. Keep on track here, Maxwell.

My eyes felt like they had sandpaper in them, but I could still feel the vague throb of my own pulse, and I wondered what the hell time it was. Stretching my memory a little, I called up the blurb from the paperwork Aleyah had given me from the gallery; *'We want to bring an embodiment of the spirit of the people of L5 to the people of the Earth Sphere. To foster an understanding of the power of free choice when combined with a code of honor and justice.'*

No... this wasn't a remembrance of the destruction of L5. This was a remembrance of the people of L5. The spirit of L5. Wufei's people. Somehow, I kept forgetting that; this wasn't about death, it was about life. About spirit. About... standing up for what you believe in. About peace and... and... I just wasn't quite sure. It felt like I had everything I needed to do this job, right there in front of me, but somehow just wasn't quite putting it all together.

I felt entirely too small to be entrusted with this message. Who in the hell was Duo Maxwell to attempt to stand up and speak for these people? It wasn't even my culture, and maybe that was going to make it so that I never really could understand. Hell... Wufei had never really understood the mind-set, how in the hell could I hope to?

Honor is a fine thing. A noble thing. But my own personal code of honor wasn't quite as regimented as, I suspect, Master Long's had been. I'd bet money that pick-pocketing, even for children on the verge of starvation, would have been severely frowned upon.

Made me think of Father Maxwell; the first time I'd met the man, I'd plowed him over running away from a fruit vender with pilfered fruit clutched in my hand. In my head, I substituted Master Long for Father Maxwell, and the incident played out completely differently. I ended up on my ass on the ground instead of the other way around, then I was taken by the ear and marched back to return the fruit and apologize. At the very least.

No, I somehow didn't think Wufei's people would have found my scrappy, scruffy self as endearing as Father and Sister Helen had.

What gave me the right?

Then I heard Wufei's voice in the back of my head; *'If it's going to happen, I want you to be the one to do it. I trust you.'*

Oh, yeah... I was under orders. And if there was a soul alive who had the right to have that say... it was Chang Wufei.

The paper under my hands had turned into the sun rising over the curve of a colony zenith, light flaring outward but not enough to eclipse the stars. L5, apparently, in better days. I fiddled with it, but it wasn't going to be any help. Somehow, I didn't think that producing a replica of the actual colony was quite what my employers had in mind.

Though... what about a scale model? The surface engraved with the names of all the dead? Assuming those names existed? I'd heard of the Lord's prayer being engraved on the head of a pin, so surely you could...

Wait... I'd already decided that was the wrong track... hadn't I?

'Yer running in circles, kid,' Solo chuckled, not bothering to reappear. 'How 'bout ya shut off the damn lights and go the hell to bed. And get off mine.'

'You sleep here?' I asked, kind of stupefied. 'You sleep at all?' Ghosts slept? Wait... he was a figment of my imagination anyway. He should only sleep when I slept. Sort of.

'Exactly!' he pointed out triumphantly and I couldn't think of an argument.

'Oh shut up,' I grumbled, my exasperation with the project getting the best of me. 'I have to fucking figure this out. If you want to sleep, go use the other couch.'

He didn't reply in a rather pointed, dead silent manner, which really wasn't much like him, so I looked up to see if maybe he'd appeared somewhere to flip me off... and found Heero standing on the step at the door of the room, dressed for the day.

'The hell?' I muttered and turned to look at the windows beside me, suddenly aware that it was starting to get light out. 'Well crap,' was all I could think to say.

'Duo,' Heero asked in this wary kind of way, 'have you been down here all night?'

'Uh... apparently?' I ventured, not entirely sure how he was going to take that. There was the predictable sigh, but the vaguely cautious look didn't go away and I realized that he'd caught me sitting there talking to... myself.

I hoped the light wasn't good enough for him to see the blush, because it felt pretty spectacular. I heard Solo's snicker echo in the back of my head.

Heero didn't quite seem to know what to make of the admission and I tossed my sketch pad down on the couch. 'I couldn't sleep after all the stupid soda. I thought I'd just work on commission sketches for a little while until the caffeine wore off, but...' I shrugged helplessly; the rest seemed pretty obvious to me and probably didn't need further explanation.

He sighed again, shaking his head and seeming to decide to let the other go without comment, for which I was grateful. That was an introduction that I was not likely to ever make.

Heero, this is Solo. Solo.... Heero.

Duo, there's nobody here but you and me.

Solo says he's happy to finally officially meet you.

Duo... baby... why don't you just sit down here...

Solo, don't call me an idiot!

Oh God, Duo... you just sit here and I'll be right back...

No, not ever going to happen. No way in hell.

Heero did seem to be working around at words that he was having trouble with though, and on the off chance that he was going to address the one-sided conversations that I really, really needed to stop having... I jumped in first with a topic change.

'There is absolutely no way I'm going to work today,' I stated, remembering the last time I'd tried while sleep deprived. 'Would you mind calling me off sick or something?'

Heero looked relieved, and I realized that's probably what he'd been struggling with; fighting his instinct to *tell* me I wasn't going to work. Because we all know what happens when you tell Duo Maxwell to do something... the exact opposite is the more than likely out-come.

'No problem at all,' he said and then grinned. 'I'll just tell Griff it was something you ate.'

I wondered how my not showing up for work on the heels of the conversation I'd had with my boss the previous afternoon was going to fly, but what the hell? Not like he didn't have a garage full of other guys to pick up the slack, and he might as well get used to my not being around since that seemed to be the goal here.

Heero had wandered off to the kitchen to use the phone to make the call, and I could hear the murmur of his voice before long. Sort of came to me then that I had access to my laptop again, without the risk of waking Heero up, so I headed upstairs. I took a moment to stop off in the bathroom and had to note as I passed the mirror that I rather looked like a hung-over raccoon. A frazzled, hung-over raccoon.

I was getting entirely too old for this sort of crap.

I distinctly remember getting my laptop and sitting on the bed in the guest room with it, I remember discovering that the average population of a standard Lagrange colony was one and a half million people. I vaguely remember turning my searches to Chinese culture and then... it all gets beyond vague.

I woke up to find Long Meilan standing beside the bed, staring down at me imperiously, the ghosts of one and a half million of her people arranged behind her, all of them staring at me... waiting for me to get my head out of my ass and figure out what in the hell I was doing.

‘Do somethin’, Rat-boy... she’s scary,’ Solo whispered inside my ear and there was a sudden loud *bang* of a noise and I started awake to find myself curled up around a laptop that had long ago gone to sleep, and the room blessedly empty.

‘Oh Jesus Christ,’ I croaked to the nobody who was listening. ‘I can not do this alone.’

There was another of those loud bangs and I figured out that a great deal of time had passed and there were people in my house, working in my kitchen.

My head was pounding, my mouth was pasty, and my eyes were full of the wisps of fading dreams.

I woke the laptop long enough to check the time, surprised as hell to find it was after noon. I wondered how in the hell I’d slept through the construction work and hoped that Heero hadn’t been making the poor guys work quietly so as not to disturb me. I took the laptop to the desk to charge, then took myself off to the bathroom to make myself presentable before venturing downstairs.

I found Heero in the living room, ensconced with this own laptop, looking like he was in his work email. Made me feel kind of stupid; there was really no reason that we both needed to be home to mind the workers; since I’d ended up calling out, if I’d managed to stay awake, Heero could have gone in. I didn’t bother to mention it, since it was obviously too damn late anyway, just smiled and gave him a wry ‘good morning’ as I shuffled through to the kitchen.

The hammering that had been happening came to a stop as I entered the room and all three of the guys stopped to stare at me a little bit apprehensively.

‘Uh... hey, Mr. Maxwell,’ Larry said, kind of looking like he wished he could step away from me. ‘Mr. Yuy said you were sick?’

I snorted and made for the refrigerator. ‘More like hung-over,’ I assured him, and they did indeed all three look a little bit relieved that I was not harboring some hideous germ. ‘Carry on,’ I smiled, and went ahead and fetched that bottle of soda from the fridge, snagged a ration bar from the box on top while I was there, and shuffled back out of the room. The hammering resumed as soon as I was gone from the construction site.

I got the heavy sigh as I came back through the living room and I just held up a hand. ‘Don’t start, Yuy,’ I grumbled. ‘I’ve accepted that the stuff has got to go. Or at least got to be cut back on. But this day is not going to happen without. Hair of the dog, and all that.’

He couldn’t seem to figure out if he should be grinning at me or lecturing me or just what, but I wasn’t hanging around, I had a date with a pissy chick and didn’t want to debate my dietary habits at the moment. Those wisps of dreams were trying to be something, and I didn’t want to lose them.

Ms. Long was trying to tell me something, and since nobody else had been a shit ton of help on this project... I was inclined to listen.

I wasn’t ready for paint just yet, but it seemed like something I should be on my feet to accomplish, so I set one of the biggest sketch pads I had on my easel and ate my breakfast while I laid out my pencils and thought about the young lady that had been staring at me this morning. Because it had been a young lady, and not that kid that I’d seen in the census database. When my hands were free, I put pencil to paper and the first thing that appeared were those piercing, judgmental, impatient eyes. Because the eyes would be the same. But the face would be more *this* way. And the hair more *that*. There

was that trace of her mother, and there that hint of her father. And somehow or other, there was the spirit of Wufei in the expression.

‘You are not my ghost,’ I told the canvas, ‘but you will speak to me.’

And she did. Through the pencil and through my hand. Through my head that was full of my dreams and Wufei’s memories; she took over that piece of paper and I swear, in one moment between strokes of the line, I thought she drew breath. And when she was done, we stared at each other and the entire world was afraid to come into the room.

She was the persona of strength and stubbornness. Full of a beauty of spirit that out-shone anything of the flesh. She was imperious and impatient and demanding of action. She laughed at my doubts, and mocked my hesitation at the same time that she disdained my audacity. Who was I to do this thing?

And I remembered the message that had rung in my head when I’d first woken up... I could not do this thing alone. This needed more than just my voice.

When I turned away from the stare of those dark eyes, it was late enough that the remodeling crew had all gone home for the day. I have no idea what Heero thought when I stormed through the living room in search of my cell phone, but he seemed to be making an effort to stay out of my way. I wondered if he’d watched me while I’d worked, because I know he has some fascination with the process, but couldn’t tell.

I dialed Aleyah’s number and suddenly wasn’t even sure if that number was a cell phone or office phone or just what. It only rang twice before she picked up.

‘Aleyah, I’ve got to talk to you,’ I blurted when she’d given me that breezy little hello. ‘Where are you?’

I caught her, for the briefest moment, without an easy retort and it made me want to laugh. Or mark the air with a finger tip, tallying up the score, because I’m pretty sure it was a first for me. ‘Pet,’ she admonished gently, ‘this had best not be bad news...’

‘Nothing like that,’ I cut her off, ‘but I really want to talk to you about this project. Do you have time...?’

‘So impertinent!’ she huffed, managing to sound more amused than annoyed. It kind of made me want to hesitate; I probably was being pretty rude, but... you don’t hesitate in the face of Aleyah Winner or all is lost.

‘It shouldn’t take too long,’ I said, trying for a tone that was a little less impatient. It made her laugh.

‘All right, my dear,’ she said, ‘come down to the gallery. I’ll tell the front desk to send you up to my office.’

‘Yes Ma’am,’ I replied, making it sound like it was all her idea to begin with. She still sounded amused when we signed off, so I guess I hadn’t pushed things too far.

Heero had been standing there listening to me, and when I finished and pocketed the phone, he gave me a lop-sided smile. ‘Have some sort of break-through?’

‘Or breakdown,’ I quipped, and it made him come around the couch and take me in his arms.

‘Going out,’ he observed. ‘Want me to come with?’

‘This might end up taking awhile,’ I had to tell him. ‘I’ve got an idea I want to sell Aleyah on, and... well... you know Aleyah.’

I could tell he wanted to ask, but could sense I wasn’t quite ready to share, so he just gave me a quick kiss and let me go.

The drive into town was uneventful, thankfully, because my thoughts were mostly turned inward and I don't remember much of it.

I didn't recognize the girl working the front desk, but she just verified I knew the way and waved me through, looking bored with the whole day. I didn't seem to make much of an impression, but then again... she hadn't had to ask my name.

When I got up to the second floor, I realized I didn't have a clue where Aleyah's actual office was. I'd only been there the one time, and had only been shown to the... whatever it had been. Conference room?

I took a leap of faith when I stepped out of the elevator and assumed it was the open doorway with the little dog sitting in front of it, giving me the cocked head look.

Coquette gave a little yip of a bark, as though warning her owner that someone was coming. I heard Aleyah's voice respond, just as though they were carrying on a conversation. 'Yes, darling... we're expecting Mr. Maxwell.'

It kind of made me want to laugh, but then... at least she wasn't talking to dead people, so I probably couldn't mock.

The darn dog stepped out of the way as I approached, just as though bowing me into the room, then following me in.

The office was kind of what I'd expected and... kind of not. The décor was an impeccable mix of old world and ultra modern. Tasteful to a fault. Form and function blended to a perfect balance. It made a pretty bizarre contrast with the half a dozen dog toys strewn across the floor and the doggie bed in the corner behind the desk with the somewhat well-used knitted doggie blanket.

'Come in, darling!' Aleyah called from her position behind the big ass desk in the middle of the room. There wasn't a trace of anything as mundane as paperwork on that desk, so God only knew what the woman was still doing in the office at that hour. 'Tell Aleyah what is so important it couldn't wait another moment.'

I hesitated on my side of the desk; she hadn't offered me a seat after all, and tried to figure out how to start this conversation. I guess presentation might have been something to work on during the drive, huh? 'It's about this project...'

She gave me an impatient wave toward the chairs facing her, and I took one while she said, 'I certainly hope you are not here to tell me you've changed your mind...'

'No!' I cut her off, and kind of wanted to wince. I sat back and took a breath, reflecting that doing this on four hours sleep was perhaps not the brightest idea I'd ever had. 'No, nothing like that at all.'

'Then what has you in such a tizzy, Pet?' she wanted to know, looking amused again, which was probably good. Rather amused than pissed.

I took another deep breath and tried to get my thoughts lined up into something resembling an order. 'This project is huge,' I informed her and did wince that time, at the total 'no duh?' of the line. All I got was a raised eyebrow, so I stumbled on. 'It's really too big for just one person...'

And that got me a narrow eyed look that was bordering on not happy. 'Darling, I explained that you will have a team of craftsman doing the actual sculpting and...'

'Not the nuts and bolts stuff,' I blurted, getting frustrated with my own lack of preparation for this meeting. I should have waited another day, gotten a decent night's sleep. Thought a little harder about just what I wanted to get across.

'Mr. Maxwell,' Aleyah said, 'just what is it you are trying to impart?'

I found myself on my feet and paced away a few steps; maybe not just sitting there under that unhappy gaze would make my brain function better. Something on the floor squeaked alarmingly, and I looked down to find a bright green dog bone. Coquette darted in to rescue her toy from under the feet of the big mean artist, and retreated with it to her bed, glaring at me the whole time.

‘Sorry,’ I muttered and then shook myself. ‘Look, Aleyah, this... message is too big for just me. I’m not even from the right culture. And trying to say everything that needs to be said in just one sculpture is just... not gonna happen.’

There was a noise that I had never heard Aleyah make before that I took to be the throttling of utter frustration. ‘Darling... Pet, are you quitting this project or not?’

‘Not,’ I said firmly, and whirled around to pace behind the chair I was supposed to be sitting in, mindful of the toys on the floor. ‘Wufei already told me I have to. But... this is too big for just one guy. Wufei says I was a part of it, and that gives me the... the... duty to do this, but it doesn’t give me the voice.’

I probably sounded like a raving lunatic, but oddly... Aleyah didn’t question what in the hell I was talking about. ‘And where are we to find this... voice?’

‘L5,’ I blurted and damned if that didn’t get me two raised eyebrows. I rushed on before she could call me crazy. ‘This needs to be bigger than just some statue. This needs to be a whole show.’

I wanted to take a moment and tally up another point, because I’d made the woman search for words twice in one day. ‘Go on...’ was all she ended up saying, something calculating going on behind her eyes.

‘Think about it, Aleyah... people don’t just pop into and out of existence in the spot they were born. People travel... people visit... people move.’ I was pacing again, arms waving while I tried to encompass the entire universe. In her corner, Coquette gave her toy a couple of hard chews and it squeaked in defense. ‘There are survivors out there. The original culture still exists in China; the entire nation didn’t take to the stars when the migration happened.’

‘And you think your voices are there?’ she asked, sounding intrigued and I threw myself back down in the chair opposite hers, leaning in to go after that spark of interest.

‘Damn straight!’ I said. ‘That colony was a center of learning; those were an artistic, proud people... and they’ve got a lot to say in this. It’s not right that I’m doing all the talking here; this monument might end up being the centerpiece but it should be just a part of a much, much bigger message.’

I shut up then, seeing that the spark was flaring into real interest; didn’t want to fan it so hard that I just blew it out.

‘An intriguing idea, Pet,’ she murmured in an absent sort of way that let me know she was thinking and thinking hard.

There was a part of me that wanted to drag the woman downstairs and make her show me just how big we could make that gallery space. Wanted to talk about color and form and music and layout, but... that wouldn’t be my part anyway, even if this mad plan took flight.

When her eyes focused on me again, she gave me a tiny little smile and simply said, ‘I like it.’

I couldn't help the grin, it felt like the moment you heard the reinforcements coming over the hill and knew you weren't in the fight alone anymore. Though I had to confess, 'I don't have a clue how to make it happen.'

The tiny smile turned just a little bit self-satisfied. 'That, Sweet, would be my job. You just go back to your studio and do yours.'

'Yes Ma'am,' I said, recognizing a dismissal when I heard one (I was getting really good at them). I stood back up, thinking that I could very well have brought Heero with me after all... the whole meeting hadn't taken a fraction of the time I'd feared it would. I'd been prepared to keep arguing until I'd won the day. Had somehow not occurred to me that it wasn't going to be a fight in the first place. I stopped in the doorway and glanced back at my patron.

'Where were you?' I asked, catching her by surprise once again. That self-satisfied smile faded away, and for the merest moment there was something in her eyes that seemed... steel sharp.

When she spoke, I somehow knew she wasn't going to tell me a damn thing. 'Heavens, Pet,' she said. 'So long ago... who remembers?'

I didn't bother to refute, just gave her an inclination of the head that I hoped clearly conveyed that I wasn't buying what she was selling, but I wasn't going to argue the point. The smile she gave me in return might have been grateful. Almost. I noticed though, that Coquette wasn't looking at me... she was watching Aleyah.

I took my leave.

There wasn't anything screamingly pressing waiting at home; just dinner and getting ready for work the next day. And maybe more angsting over the actual sculpture design that I had not yet managed to pull out of my ass. So I took a few extra minutes to take the long way out of the gallery, wandering through to look at the exhibit of the mysterious Rain.

I'd never paid much attention to abstract art; it just seemed kind of... haphazard to me. The slopping of paint in the general direction of canvas. Something any motivated monkey could do, but... well... there was something to the choices of color. Proportions and blending. The show was... odd. I was rather surprised to find that individual pieces made me feel emotion from nothing more than the use of certain colors together, or the sweep of a brush stroke. Some of the paintings were nothing but whorls of color, and some only appeared to be so on the surface, but if you looked harder, you could find fractured things within. If I hadn't known that Heero was waiting at home, I might have ended up spending a couple of hours looking over the show.

I picked up a card on the way out, just to see if I could look the artist up later. A glance at it while I walked to my car revealed a web site. The artist had a web site. I blinked at the notion, pocketing the card as I climbed in and pulled away.

There was a thought... should I have a web site? I didn't exactly have a huge body of work to post or anything, but... did all 'real' artists have web sites?

Maybe if I had my own web site, it would be a little less obvious that I was a fake? That I was just making shit up as I went along?

Probably something to put on the back burner after the current project and the leap of faith I was about to make in the job department. And the remodeling.

It was almost kind of funny how my head was just as full of thoughts on the drive home, just... different thoughts. Maybe I was just getting too damn introspective for my

own good? Though, if I was actually going to do this thing, I suppose I really couldn't get too introspective. It was about to sort of be my career by default, after all, really needed to be thinking about it.

When I arrived home, I was a little surprised to find Heero in my studio. After you come through the front door of the house and step slightly to the right, it's a straight line of sight down the hall, so he didn't bother trying to pretend he hadn't been standing in front of my easel staring at what I'd produced that afternoon. Just gave me a sheepish little smile and waited for me to come and join him.

'Welcome home,' he said when I came up to stand beside him. 'How'd it go?'

'Surprisingly well,' I replied, dropping a kiss on his cheek and turning to look at the portrait with the fresh sense of not having seen it for awhile. Meilan had an arresting gaze. 'I had expected to have to sell the idea, but Aleyah liked it.'

'Liked... what?' Heero finally had to ask, and it was my turn with the sheepish grin.

'Sorry, I wasn't meaning to be all secretive,' I said, leaning slightly until he slipped an arm around me. 'Somewhere in the middle of the night I figured out that this needs to be more than just a one trick pony. It needs to be a full-blown gallery show.'

Heero was kind of quiet for a moment, and there was a hint of tension coming from him. 'A... whole show?'

I snorted, seeing what he thought I was saying. 'Not me. Hell, I'll be lucky if I manage to get my shit together enough to produce the main event.'

'But then, who...?' he asked, and I found my head resting on his shoulder, suddenly starting to feel the press of a long day.

'Don't have a clue,' I told him. 'Well... not really. That's Aleyah's problem. But you can't tell me there aren't L5 survivors out there with more artistic talent than I've got.'

He didn't reply to that, but boy could I feel the wheels going around. If I'd been less tired, I might have tried to read his mood. We just stood there for a minute or two looking at the page in front of us.

'Who is she?' he asked eventually.

'Who do you think it is?' I countered and it made him make a funny little noise of almost frustration.

'I thought I should know,' he confessed. 'She looks... almost familiar.'

'Long Meilan,' I said. 'All grown up. She kind of gave me nightmares last night. I guess she's just got a lot to do with this. Sort of.' I petered out, trying to figure out why I felt I needed to explain myself.

There was the sharp sound of Heero's indrawn breath, and I lifted my head to look at him. He was staring at the portrait like he was just seeing it for the first time, even though I knew he'd obviously already gone over every detail. It was a complete reevaluation with the new knowledge.

'I... can see it,' he breathed and there was something there in his voice that I couldn't quite figure out. It was an almost reverent tone. But there was something else underneath that I couldn't catalog. I watched him stare for a moment and decided I didn't really want to know right that moment.

'You eat?' I asked, breaking the mood, whatever in the hell it had been, and he shook himself, looking away from the sketch.

‘Yeah,’ he said, really looking at me for the first time since I’d walked in. His hand found its way up to brush across my cheek, and he smiled gently. ‘You look tired. You want me to fix you something?’

‘Nah,’ I grinned. ‘I’m just gonna do that thing you hate and eat a ration bar.’

He snorted and shook his head, but didn’t argue the point.

It had somehow gotten to be late and we just settled into the evening rituals, showers and dinner and bed. Comfortable things that finished off the strange mood. I’m not even sure I remember crawling into bed that night. I only know it happened because that’s where I found myself the next morning.

It was something of a shock to find that I really just didn’t want to deal with going in to work. Somehow, the notion of quitting had settled into my brain somewhere, and made itself at home. What yesterday had felt like a stable haven, somehow just felt restricting in the light of a new day. How completely bizarre is that?

Heero had figured out how to scramble eggs in the microwave, and had insisted on getting up and making breakfast that morning. We were settled in the living room, eating off our laps, me gearing up to heading in to work, and him trying to turn the construction zone anteroom into a home office. My head was still full of the previous day’s introspection junk though and I had a sudden thought.

‘Do you think I ought to go to school?’ I asked, and made Heero pause mid-bite.

‘For what?’ he wanted to know, looking a little confused.

‘This art thing,’ I explained. ‘I mean, if I’m really going to try to make a go of it, shouldn’t I have some... I dunno... art cred, or something?’

‘Art cred?’ he parroted and I could see he wasn’t following me.

‘Like... street cred, you know?’ I tried to clarify. ‘Before people figure out I’m just faking it?’

The expression on his face kind of made me think that he wished he could just bury his face in his hands, or maybe pull at his hair.

‘Don’t you think,’ he said, fork full of eggs still poised in the air. ‘That having Aleyah Winner’s backing, and being a client of Jack Lee doesn’t sort of give you... art cred?’

‘I dunno,’ I said, taking a bite of my toast while I thought about it. ‘Maybe with your average person, but what about with real artists?’

He stared at me for a long moment before suddenly blurting, ‘God, you’re *serious...*’

The knock at the front door made us both jump. The construction crew was there, which meant...

‘Shit! I am so running late!’

I gulped down the last of my orange juice and ran out the door with my toast in hand.

‘Morning Mr. Mawell!’ Darryl called as I ran down the front steps and I tossed a wave over my shoulder.

Oh yeah, I could definitely get used to the idea of being my own boss again. I entertained myself on the drive in by imaging not having to ever look at another time clock again as long as I lived.

I wondered sometimes if Griff didn’t have a secret apartment somewhere in the Preventer building or something. The guy was just always there; the first one in and the

last one out. I wondered if he had a home life, or if his job was the single most important thing in his world. I wondered if I should feel bad for him or not. Hell, maybe this was the job he'd dreamed about since he was a little kid, and spending God only knew how many hours a day hanging out in a garage, was just the best thing since ice cream to him.

But since he was making himself so conveniently available, I decided to just get this show on the road and be done with it. So the first thing I did after swiping my employee card through that damn time clock, was head straight to Griff's office. He looked up from his perpetual paperwork of doom and glared at me.

'You're late,' he grumbled. 'And whatever you were sick with, you better not have infected my whole crew. And what are you doing in my office?'

I pulled out the 'guest' chair and sat down across from him. 'I know, I didn't, and I'm quitting.'

It made him stare at me for a moment. Reminded me of my earlier conversation with Heero. I sure hoped the staring thing wasn't going to be the trend for the day.

'The hell?' he said, tossing his pencil down on his desk. 'I didn't mean right this damn minute, Maxwell!'

'Yeah, well... why waste time?' I asked, grinning at him somewhat unrepentantly. 'Not like you really need me anyway. I mean... you only hired me because Heero strong armed you... right?'

I was fishing, just a little bit, and I hadn't thought I really wanted to know, but I realized once I walked out of that place, I wasn't likely to ever find out the truth of the matter. Which somehow piqued my curiosity. Griff just snorted.

'The opening was there, kid,' he told me, obviously seeing the fishing for what it was. So opportunity knocked and Heero just took advantage? That was somehow better than thinking he'd forced somebody, somewhere to find a place for me.

'So what do I do?' I said, leaning forward and moving on. 'Never really quit a job before. I don't really have to write a damn letter and all that crap, do I?'

He shook his head and rolled his eyes, giving out with a long-suffering sigh. 'You givin' me two weeks' notice, at least?'

That sounded kind of standard; I'd heard the phrase before anyway. And I suppose that was only fair so you wouldn't leave an employer in the lurch, trying to hunt somebody up and train them. But damn; I had so much to do with this latest commission, that it would have been really nice to just say 'I quit', gather my tools, walk out and go home.

'I guess I can do that,' was what I said though. Griff had been good to me, even when I'd been a less than stellar person to be around. And even when I was randomly not showing up for work because I'd done something stupid like deciding to suddenly take off across country to return a journal, or gotten myself kidnapped. Sure, he'd yelled, but Griff yelled just saying good morning. It was expected.

He eyed me speculatively. 'But you'd rather not.'

Ouch. Being called on it made me squirm and I ducked my head. 'Well... I've got this huge ass commission that's giving me fits. But that's not your problem, and I'm not going to be a jerk about it.'

He just sat there for a couple of minutes, getting this look that made me think he wasn't even seeing me anymore. Then he sat forward all of a sudden and planted his elbows on his desk. 'How about this, kid,' he began. 'You got a little bit of vacation

accrued so far this year; what say you take off the rest of this week and then come back and finish out your two weeks?’

I mulled that over and had to admit it was probably the best solution, though I could feel the weight of those two weeks tied to my ankle like a ball and chain. Or maybe that was just Guilt beast. Apparently I had moved from denial, to acceptance, and on to wallowing in the notion of quitting.

‘Done,’ I agreed and rose to leave.

‘Hold on there, artist-boy!’ he said, bringing me up short. ‘This is gonna generate a bunch of paper-work and I ain’t doin’ it all myself. You’re writing me that damn letter and it better be all professional and shit!’

I grimaced but then had to grin at him. ‘Ok, you old fart... I’ll write your damn letter. Now do I need to clock back out, or are you going to just void the last fifteen minutes?’

He snorted, giving me a half-hearted glare. ‘I’ll take care of it... just get your ass outta here.’

I gave him a little salute and took myself ‘outta’ there. He let me get almost to the bay doors before he hollered after me, ‘And you damn well better be on time Monday, Maxwell!’

‘Will do, Boss-man!’ I hollered back and waved cheerfully at the guys as I exited stage left.

I whistled all the way to my car, but it kind of hit me while I was putting the keys in the ignition that I’d come real close to making it the last time I’d pull out of that parking lot. It made me stop and kind of look around; two weeks. Ten days. Ten more times of parking my car here and walking into that building. Ten more days of working next to those guys. Ten more times and it would be the last time and... I would not be back.

I would miss them, as weird as they could be sometimes.

Kind of like I had missed the Sweepers...

Kind of like I’d missed Solo and the gang...

It made me shiver, so I started the car and pulled out.

It felt beyond stupid that I’d driven all the way in just to spend less than twenty minutes in Griff’s office, and then turn around and go home again. I tried to think of some other errand I needed to run while I was in the city, but there was just nothing. It was too early for lunch, and going back to the gallery to look at somebody else’s work just seemed a bit self-indulgent at the moment. I’d just committed myself to my new career, and I had a job on my plate. There wasn’t any time to be wasted.

Heero was completely taken by surprise when I walked back through the front door, his expression doing this dance that started out concerned before seeming to dismiss that and leap straight to... kind of shocked.

‘Duo,’ he asked, tone one that told me a wrong answer would be bad, ‘you didn’t just... *quit*, did you?’ In a bad way, since he’d known quitting was on the agenda.

‘Relax,’ I grinned, going to flop down on the couch opposite where he’d set up his Preventer agency annex. ‘I guess my vacation days had added back up and Griff gave me three days off. The two week thing starts next week.’

He looked relieved and I realized he’d have been... professionally embarrassed? If I’d done something lame like just walked off the job. It made me really stop and think

about the limb he'd crawled out on, when he'd gotten me that job. Even if he hadn't had to pressure Une or Griff or that nice lady in HR to make a position happen for me, he'd obviously at least pulled some strings. I could very easily have ended up being a humiliation to him. I had a twinge wondering if maybe I *had* been, but no... Griff had always assured me that he was more than happy with my work, and he's not the kind of guy to blow smoke up one's ass just for the hell of it. If he wasn't happy, nobody was happy. I'd have known it.

I suppose there might have been a bad moment for Heero that time he'd put out the APB on me, but I really didn't feel all that guilty about that one... that had been his own stupid choice.

I vowed to be a most excellent employee the next two weeks despite my short-timer's disease... I would make damn sure that there was nothing in the end of my career with the Preventers that could cause Heero to regret my having had it in the first place.

'You know,' I had to point out, 'If you want to go on in to the office now, there's really no reason for the both of us to be here.'

He had to think about it, and it made me feel a bit better about my own lack of motivation when I realized that he kind of had to work to change gears. 'I suppose it would be nice not to burn more of my vacation,' he mused. He was giving me a kind of speculative look that made me expect him to say something more, but he didn't, just suddenly seemed to make up his mind and started gathering his stuff. A quick change of clothes and he was out the door in less than fifteen minutes. Leaving me with a house full of construction workers and ghosts. Though the ghosts didn't seem to like all the hammering, and were being pretty scarce.

I had to resist the urge to go fetch a bottle of soda to take out to my studio with me, and kind of sighed to myself; this cutting back thing was not going to be fun. I hadn't really been aware of just what a habit it had become.

Meilan's portrait was still sitting on the easel being all haughty and scornful of all she surveyed. I wondered exactly how she had died, but knew that was a firm and solid 'none of my damn business' and didn't even consider pursuing it. Only one person alive could tell me those details and I wasn't about to ask just to assuage my vaguely morbid curiosity. I knew it had happened in a field of flowers and that Wufei had been there. I knew there had been a war on. More than that... I did not need to know.

I took the sketch pad off the easel, closed it and set it aside. I would not risk waking a ghost that stood such a high chance of being restless to begin with. Solo would kill me if she ended up haunting our asses.

I got out a canvas and settled it in her place, having decided somehow that I just needed to stop thinking so damn much about this memorial. I needed to stop chasing my own tail, and maybe working on something besides frog sketches would help get my brain out of the rut it seemed to have fallen into. I doubted with all the power tools serenading me from the other room, that much of anything seriously creative was going to happen anyway, but maybe I could use the time to reboot.

And laugh if you will, but I didn't even know I was going to be painting the field of daises before the brush touched the canvas and the first petals were formed. But you know... what the hell? Maybe if Aleyah ran with my idea about an entire L5 show, I'd have more to contribute than the center piece.

Assuming, of course, that I actually contributed that most important of parts, but... I wasn't supposed to be thinking about that, now was I?

I kind of wanted to put some music on, but didn't figure the guys would appreciate the volume I'd have to set the stereo on in order to hear it in the back of the house. I really needed to get around to doing some of that wiring I kept talking about doing. Or... maybe I just needed to get my own little stereo system for the studio? Maybe that would be easier? Or was that just being self-indulgent?

I had to settle for listening to the music of construction; had a fairly steady back-beat, but I couldn't say much for the rhythm.

While I'd obviously spent time around the workers before, it hadn't been as much as Heero, and I found the snippets of conversation to be... weird. There is a similarity to the types of topics that you will find bandied about when you get any group of guys together, be they Sweepers, mechanics, or carpenters. So, on the surface it wasn't much different from being at work. Only now and again, words would drift by that kind of left me blinking.

'...Caulking! And on the inside...'

'Oh bull...'

'...seriously...'

'...biscuit join..?'

But then, I suppose somebody listening in on a random conversation at the garage would just end up scratching their heads too. The last one I really remember had been about the pros and cons of waxing a car that had somehow ended up being about Dave's wife waxing her legs. What would a passing stranger have made of *that*?

Hell, what had the couple at McMurphy's place made of my table full of screw-ball friends the other night? They had probably come away thinking that there had been a batch of people who could barely manage a civil conversation. Or... maybe we looked like we were related; people who were forced to see each other, like it or not? What would that make Toria? My sister in law? Wasn't that a kinky idea? But we sort of had been that close once upon a time.

Close enough that I'd practically mid-wifed their kids, and was about to do so again. One way or the other. Either Toria's way... on a round trip to L3, or Heero's way... in dock, firmly on the ground.

Out in the kitchen, things had gotten quiet, and Darryl called out, 'Hey, Mr. Maxwell! We're breaking for lunch, ok?'

I stepped over where I could look down the hallway and gave them a wave, watching as they filed out, arguing about the best place to go. It was almost too quiet once they were gone, which made me want to laugh; I'm apparently pretty damn hard to make happy.

But when I went back to work on my field of flowers, I was finally able to find the zone. My main focus went to the mating of paint with canvas, while the sub-conscious bits that were left over danced off with thoughts of family and friends and just what constituted the former when one was a poor orphan child from the streets. Sometimes I imagine the inside of my head is something like a giant, empty ballroom where my thoughts can mix and mingle and sometimes go off in dark corners for illicit trysts. I don't know what all goes on in there, and sometimes I'm glad of that, and sometimes I wish I could record it for later viewing.

I just know that not only did I manage to ignore the guys coming back from lunch, I managed to ignore them working the rest of the afternoon and didn't come up for air until Darryl called me, God only knows how many times, when he came to tell me they were leaving for the day.

I jerked back to reality feeling like my daises were fracturing and escaping me, and I hope I told him goodbye and not to fuck off. Really I do. I never heard them leave the house. Never heard Heero come back in it either, but when the painting was finally done with me, there he sat on the couch with that enthralled look on his face that he gets when artsy stuff is happening, and... it was dark outside.

One of the weirdest things for a colony brat to get used to when first stepping foot on old mother earth, is that the horizon curves the wrong way. Colonies are rings and we make our homes on the inside of those rings. The earth is not a ring; the earth is a ball. So it's just all kinds of wrong.

My field of... no; make that Wufei's field of flowers, curves the way it should. The daisies at the front of the canvas are so detailed and real looking, you could almost pluck them from the canvas, but as they recede into the distance they begin to subtly change... the green of the grass darkens, the white of the flowers becomes crystalline and then they start to break apart... and then the grass is so green it's black and the shards of flowers are mixing with the stars. It's impossible to tell just when that transition is made, it's such a gradual thing. Everything just... falls away into the depths of space.

Or... maybe the stars are coming down to form the flowers and my brain just had it backward? Who the hell knew?

'Hey,' I said and Heero came immediately to kiss my cheek and study the painting with me.

'It's beautiful,' he said softly, 'is it done?'

'Seems to be,' I smiled, leaning my head on his shoulder tiredly. 'It let go, at least.'

He kind of nuzzled my head up and kissed me, a tentative thing for all the heat I could feel behind it. 'Clean up?' he asked, and there was such a tone of carefully checked... *wanting* in his voice, that I damn near said the hell with the brushes and palette. But he moved off to close the house up for the night, and my brain told me I'd be needing those brushes again and would be pissed if I didn't take the two damn minutes I would need to clean them out.

But that was all I took the time for before we found our way upstairs and it was hours before he finally let me sleep. Somewhere in there I started to wonder if maybe it wasn't the artistic process that fascinated Heero so damn much.

I'm not sure just what to blame, the lack of consistent sleep the last few days, the missing of a couple of meals, or the marathon sex... but he woke before me the next morning. I roused up to find him propped up against the headboard, smiling down at me.

Things that had been floating around in my head about family and friends and life and relationships kind of settled into place and I'm afraid the first words out of my mouth didn't do much for that smile.

'I think I'm going to take Toria up on her offer,' I heard myself say, and regretted starting the day like that almost the moment the words were out of my mouth.

His expression went kind of still and I just felt like a jerk. I really wished that my brain could learn to sort this kind of crap out in the conscious part, instead of piecing it

all together in my sleep and presenting me with decisions at oh dark thirty in the morning. Maybe then I could keep things to myself until the timing was a little better. It sucked to be able to see Heero's whole day get spoiled in the blink of an eye.

'I'm sorry,' I tried, wanting that other look to come back and not be ruined.

He sighed and then just shook his head, giving me the rueful smile, leaning down to kiss the top of my head. 'It's all right,' he said. 'I kind of expected it.'

Rueful wasn't as good as that other look, but it wasn't as bad as that closed off one, so I wriggled my way up a little higher to bestow a better good morning kiss.

'Wish you'd have gone ahead and told me how it was going to come out then,' I teased, hoping to salvage at least some of the mood. 'Would have saved me the trouble of stewing about it the last few days.'

He snorted a laugh and pulled me in to pillow my head on his chest.

'But if I'd told you, you'd have just done something different to be contrary,' he chuckled, and though it had been a joke, there was a moment where I could feel him turning the notion around in his head to see if it might actually have worked.

I gave him a good poke in the ribs. 'Do not attempt to reverse psychology me,' I warned, and it made him laugh.

'It probably wouldn't end well,' he agreed and then all of a sudden he was rolling me over with intention.

'Morning sex, Yuy?' I gasped out when his mouth began seeking sensitive spots.

'Not going to miss the chance,' he murmured against my skin. 'You don't usually hang around to give me the opportunity.'

I kept my wits just long enough to glance at the clock to verify we had the time, then just went with the flow.

After the previous evening, I had expected it to be one of those lazy, slow times, but Heero was having none of that. I found myself astride his hips in record time and we were down to the gasping, straining, needy parts before I knew it.

Maybe I should consider giving him the opportunity more often?

Then it was my turn to lie around lazily while Heero had to rush getting ready for work. Though, as in Heero's case, the lazing was mostly for affect as I had to rush in order to be showered and dressed before the work crew arrived for the day.

I was absolutely over the moon when the guys showed up with the new sink in tow. And it was actually the right style. The light at the end of the tunnel might not be a speeding train after all. I was starting to consider throwing a party when this renovation thing was all over. Because having these guys in my house was making me feel like a prisoner. They seemed like a nice enough bunch, but 'seemed like' was not enough of an endorsement to leave them alone while they worked. I kept thinking of things I wanted to go do... and then not being able to. I could have gotten the weekend's trip to the grocery out of the way. Could have run down to the city building for some of those yard waste tags. Could have stopped off at the garden center for that bag of grass seed I needed. Instead I changed the sheets, and ran loads of laundry, and dusted the bedroom, and completely understood Heero's fanatical chore doing of the previous week.

Babysitting was a damn boring job.

But to be honest, I was a little loath to possibly lose myself in my art with them in the house again. It had been a bit disconcerting the day before, to realize that the guys

could probably just about had their family and friends come over for a party in my dining room, and I might not have noticed.

Besides, my preliminary sketches weren't due for three weeks, right? Well, more like two and a half now, but perhaps it would be best not to dwell on the deadline aspect.

By afternoon I'd run out of things that I could even pretend needed doing, and ended up on the couch with my laptop, trying to compose an email to Hayden and Toria.

Even though I'd already made the conscious, unconscious and official decision that I was going to make the jaunt to L3 and back... I was kind of reluctant to actually commit to that fact.

Not that I really had doubts, exactly, just... I knew Heero didn't want me to go.

I don't go out of my way to drive the guy crazy, though it probably seems that way. Setting Toria's somewhat tenacious nagging aside, it really was something that I probably ought to deal with. The universe was a wide and wonderful place, and I would hate to end up limited to the tiny corner of it that was Earth, just because I was a chicken-shit. I needed to make sure that I wasn't just doing more of that running and hiding. I had made a couple of decisions about my future; giving up the captaincy of my own ship had been one of them, and while there was regret there, there really wasn't any *regret* there. It had been the right choice. And not just because I'd lost my nerve... even if I could throw a switch and make it all not have happened... I wouldn't go back. My life now was with Heero, and that was right where I wanted to be. I loved him and I wanted to be with him. End of story.

But there was more to space and more to the Earth sphere than owning your own ship. I did not have the... whatever in the hell it was, that had made me the pilot I had once been. Kurt used to call me survival instinct challenged and maybe I'd just found that instinct. Maybe I hadn't lost something, so much as I had found something... something to care about.

But not being a pilot should not lock me to the ground.

That's what I needed to face down and get under control. If I wanted a thing, I should be able to have that thing, and I should not be kept from that thing by my own fears.

Really.

If I wanted to go to L2 for Christmas, the biggest concern should be 'can we afford it', not 'will Duo have a meltdown'.

I have no idea how long I sat staring at my inbox before I finally fired off an email that was probably a bit terser than it should have been. *'Only for you, Spacer-girl. Get me your flight plan and I'll see what I can do. I'll make no promises. And don't even think about making any plans for a drinking binge; it will not end well, and there will be no further discussion on the point or the whole thing is off. Love Duo.'*

And then, on a crazy, hamster-induced whim I sent off a message to Howard too.

'Hey, old man... bizarre question; was there anything recovered from the destruction of L5?'

Because if anybody would know that, it would be the Sweepers. Not that I had a clue why it mattered, but I guess me and the hamsters had just been thinking on the subject quite a bit lately, and I think we've already established that I'm a weirdly curious kind of guy.

Or maybe that's curiously weird.

I'm not sure if it was that idle curiosity or just plain boredom that led me to do what I did next.

It was early enough that the work crew was still there, but getting close enough to quitting time that they seemed to just be packing up for the day, when I wandered into the kitchen.

'Hey, Mr. Maxwell,' Larry greeted me, grinning broadly. 'I think one more day is going to do it!'

'No shit?' I said, and looking around, was delighted to realize he was probably right.

'Down to the trim work and hooking the plumbing up,' he agreed. 'We should be out of your hair tomorrow afternoon.'

The whoop of joy was purely internal. 'Well, before I lose my captive audience then,' I said, 'can I ask you guys a question?'

Darryl looked intrigued, though his brother kind of looked like he thought he was about to be quizzed on his work. 'Sure,' Larry replied for them all, and waited expectantly.

'This is kind of like an opinion poll sort of thing,' I confessed, starting to feel a little dumb. 'I've got this project, and I'm curious... you're all ground... uh... you've all lived Earth-side a long time, right?'

'Ground-bounders,' Darryl grinned. 'Yep. Lived here our whole lives.'

'Ok,' I grinned back, 'good... so if I said L5, what's the first thing that comes to mind?'

For a moment, they just kind of stood there looking at me, like it really was a quiz and I was just the meanest teacher they'd ever had. Darryl was the first one to give it a go.

'Well,' he said kind of hesitantly, 'the self-destruct, I guess.'

I didn't say anything, just waited to see what else they would come up with. Larry kind of nodded sagely.

'Yeah, you can't really think about L5 without thinking about that,' he said, and then he and Darryl sort of turned to the brother to see what he would add. The kid was a pretty quiet one, and I wasn't sure he was going to say anything at first, but then he kind of got this light in his eyes.

'Shenlong,' he chimed in, and Larry cringed, like he was a little bit embarrassed.

'Not that Gundam crap again,' he muttered, and the kid... what *was* his name... frowned defensively.

'They was cool,' he grumbled, and went back to picking up tools. 'And Shenlong was the coolest.'

I blinked at him, opened my mouth to say... I wasn't even sure what... and then closed it again. Surely he had to know? Well, he certainly didn't act like he knew. I glanced at the other two and wasn't getting any knowing looks. What the hell, maybe being a Gundam fan didn't necessarily make you a pilot fan? It would just be a tidbit of information that would derail my topic anyway, so I let it go.

'Uh, yeah... cool,' I said. 'But what about before that? What do you know about the colony itself?'

'Chinese, right?' Larry said, bending down to pick up a bent nail that had been dropped on the floor, and turning to toss it in the trash.

‘Yeah,’ Darryl said and there was a hint of ‘duh’ in his tone, but not enough that Larry picked up on it. ‘They were Buddhists and...’

‘They all knew Kung Fu,’ his brother supplied, finishing the sentence in a way, judging from the look on Darryl’s face, not intended. I was starting to see where the brother was coming from. And it had more to do with television than it did history.

Darryl was kind of glaring at his brother’s back, as his sibling had gone back to preparing to go home. ‘They did not all...’

‘I read once that they duplicated some of the biggest Chinese temples there,’ Larry chimed in and I’d seen Giles derail Dave enough to know the technique when I saw it. It worked; Darryl stopped glaring and dropped the Kung Fu thing.

‘Yeah,’ he said instead, ‘it was supposed to be real pretty there.’

Larry agreed and the talk turned to architecture while they finished getting their stuff together and I walked them out. I suppose it wasn’t too surprising, considering they were a bunch of builders, but... it was kind of strange. I realized that really... they just didn’t know squat about L5. Or... probably not much of anything about any of the colonies, really. I stood on the porch and watched them load up their truck, chewing on that lack of education and wondering. I’d grown up a relatively uneducated child of the colonies, and I don’t suppose I’d know a ton of crap about the history of Earth, but I’d known the key points. I’d known the history of Sanc. Had known who the Winners were. Would have been able to point out the major continents on a map. It was kind of... disappointing somehow.

Out by the truck, Darryl’s brother (I really ought to learn the guy’s name), was looking around in a way that, quite frankly, seemed a little bit theatric. Then he made that classic ‘hold on a minute’ gesture and jogged back up the steps to the porch.

‘Forgot my watch,’ he mumbled, looking a little embarrassed. ‘Had to take it off to get my arm behind the counter.’

I made that ‘ah’ sound you make to indicate you understood, and followed him back in the house in case he needed help looking for it. Not that I figured he would. Sure enough, he snagged it off the counter right away and then turned around all red in the face, but with a kind of... rebellious look on his face.

‘Shenlong wasn’t just cool,’ he blurted out, looking at his watch more than he was me. ‘It was like... a symbol. And they were proud people, you know? Larry thinks they was dumb for blowin’ up a whole colony, but... they wouldn’t be used, you know?’

It was a strange kind of moment, and the thing that struck me first was... he really wasn’t a kid; he probably wasn’t any younger than I was. The second thing was... he wasn’t quite as dense as I’d thought he was. He was the quiet one; didn’t talk much, and I’m afraid I’d made the judgment that he was kind of a big, dumb grunt. But maybe not so much?

‘Yeah,’ I agreed. ‘I know.’

He looked up at me, kind of smiled and then ducked his head. ‘See ya tomorrow, Mr. Maxwell.’ And he was out the door.

I walked over and watched through the front screen as they pulled away. After a few minutes, when the taillights had disappeared, I pulled out my cell phone and called Aleyah’s number.

She must have checked the caller id, because she picked up with, ‘Darling, I hope you aren’t in the throes of another tizzy?’

‘No Ma’am,’ I reassured, ‘I just had a question; just how high tech can I get with this job?’

There was a quiet moment while she made me wait, more than she hesitated. You see the distinction there? ‘Pet, this is to be a sculpture, you understand that... yes?’

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘But I have some... ideas. Accents, really. And it might end up being pretty...’ over the top didn’t seem like a good choice of words, but I guess Aleyah knows me well enough that she didn’t bother to let me finish.

‘Darling boy,’ she said, her tone one of high amusement, ‘this is the single most important work the gallery has ever sponsored. You have the complete backing of three of the wealthiest people in the Earth Sphere... money, is not really an issue.’

‘Perfect,’ I grinned. She even managed to sign off without asking me how much longer I was going to take. Which was good, because I couldn’t have told her.

But I had the germ of an idea.

When Heero got home from work, it was to find me sitting on the counter in my studio, pencil in teeth, papers scattered everywhere, and laptop balanced on one knee. On the other end of the counter, I’d set up a sort of collage of the paintings and sketches I’d managed to accumulate so far, and Master Long the frog, Meilan, and the flowers of L5 were keeping me company.

There was something missing from that grouping, but I would have to figure *that* out later.

I heard Heero coming down the hall before I could see him, and his step was... not hurried, but pretty purposeful.

‘Duo?’ he called before he came into view. ‘You back there? We’ve only got about fifteen minutes to get going to make the game...’ he stopped when he got to the doorway, his expression flitting through about half a dozen emotions so fast I’m not sure I got them all. There was a second of disappointment though, I know I saw that, before he got just a little bit excited.

‘This looks promising,’ he smiled. ‘You have a break through?’

‘Got some solid thoughts at least,’ I admitted, and began putting things away. Heero frowned and came across the room.

‘Hey, don’t do that,’ he chided, putting a hand over mine where I was gathering papers. ‘This is much more important than some silly ball game.’

I tilted my head, offering him a welcome home kiss and he took it. I snagged his tie while I had him that close. ‘I’m just fiddling at the moment anyway,’ I told him, and then more firmly, ‘besides... nothing’s more important than you are.’

The smile he got was quite despite himself, and it came with the hint of a blush of pleasure. He kissed me again, in an effort to hide it, but I still had hold of his tie and when he drew away, I wouldn’t let go. ‘*Nothing*,’ I told him again, giving him a little shake. His eyes were telling me that the game was starting to fade from his thoughts, so I nudged him back, climbing down from the counter. ‘Now go change.’

He sighed, his soft smile turning to a rueful grin. Another quick kiss and he went as directed. I shuffled my papers together, put my laptop to sleep and went to find my shoes.

Sure, it was just a ballgame, and sure, if I’d been in the middle of some serious creativity it might have been a different story. But I’d seen that flash of disappointment, and that was not a look I wanted on Heero’s face if I could help it.

Is it sad that the whole ‘ball game’ thing was already sort of... old hat? Kind of made me feel stupid, to be honest. But hey, I’ve always been an over-achiever... why have mole hills when you can make mountains out of them?

Since I was with Heero, I didn’t need to check the posting, and we by-passed the concession stand all together, heading straight for the diamond of the evening. I recognized some faces and assumed that they were spouses and kids of players; probably showed up for every game. There were some missing as well, Giles didn’t appear to have come out, but Dave was there again sitting with Bobby, and they’d saved me a seat.

At least they didn’t make me sit between them, so I was able to dismiss that notion I’d had from the previous game about being ‘protected’. Maybe it had just been my imagination.

The umpire guy had already called the game to start, and the first few batters had done their swing and miss thing, when Quatre appeared and plopped himself down beside me.

‘Did I miss anything?’ he asked the bleachers in general, and Dave was right there with a blow by blow.

‘Nothing yet,’ he reported. ‘We won the toss, and we’re still in the first half of the first inning. Two up and two down.’

‘Who are we playing?’ Quatre asked, squinting across at the other team’s bench, but then answered his own question. ‘Oh... Claret Heights. They beat us last time, didn’t they?’

‘Yeah,’ Bobby replied, grinning broadly, ‘but their regular pitcher transferred and I heard the guy replaced him ain’t so hot.’

There was a bit more back and forth on the roster of the other team and it kind of struck me as funny; leave it to Quatre to be strategizing something he really didn’t have any control over. And there was that ‘we’ thing again. I’d have mocked them over it, but I’m pretty sure I’d done it myself since that first game. It was just too easy to do, despite everything.

‘Trowa coming?’ I asked, when they ran out of locker room gossip, and Quatre gave me a look that was just a little bit hesitant around the edges.

‘No,’ he said kind of carefully, ‘he was helping Abdul change out an oil pump.’

Took me just a second to realize that he thought I might be disappointed, or otherwise bothered by the fact that it was just him, and that Trowa wasn’t going to be there. I suppose, looking back over the past year or so, I could hardly blame him. But it still made me want to cringe inside. I really needed to put some effort into the relationship. And not just thinking about it.

‘Jeez, Winner...’ I teased, ‘too damn cheap to hire a mechanic?’

‘As if,’ he drawled, ‘they find it *fun*.’ Then he took his eyes off the field long enough to give me a speculative look. ‘But then, you used to find it *fun* too.’

‘Before I was doing it for a living,’ I muttered and it made Bobby laugh.

‘No shit,’ he agreed, and it gave me a moment of wondering if trying to turn this art thing into a living wasn’t going to be a mistake in the long run. What if being told I *had* to paint and draw dried up the ability? Wouldn’t that just be a bitch?

Out on the field, the third out was made and the teams switched.

‘So what have you been up too lately?’ I asked Quatre, mindful of my inner pledge to reconnect with the guy. ‘Heard you’ve been globetrotting?’

‘Yeah!’ Dave chimed in. ‘Was it India or China... Barton couldn’t remember!’
Quatre chuckled and rolled his eyes, ‘Vancouver.’

I suspected that Trowa had just been yanking chains, because I was pretty sure he wouldn’t have been that far off. Now that I really stopped to think about it, no way in hell he hadn’t known which country. Which city, which hotel/convention center, and probably the entire itinerary. I started to say as much, but Dave elbowed me about then.

‘Yuy’s up,’ he told me, just as though I hadn’t noticed. I thought about yelling something... a lot of the other partner’s did, but... well... maybe this ball game thing wasn’t quite as old hat as I’d thought.

‘What were you doing in Vancouver?’ I said instead, just to kind of make sure nothing else came out of my mouth.

At the plate, Heero swung at a pitch that I’m sure he could have hit with his eyes closed, and missed. There were some jeers from the other team’s bench and I knew in that moment that I’d never be able to play the game; even without my weird non-intrusion issues... my inner street brat reared his head at the sound of those taunts and wanted to smack that ball into the next county just so he could smirk.

‘Lumber,’ Quatre was saying. ‘Nail it, Heero!’ he called, and I wondered if he had an inner brat too. ‘I need a new supplier to meet the needs of Winner Enterprise’s reconstruction division.’

Dave, weirdly, decided to home in on one word... new. ‘What happened to the old one?’

A frown crossed Quatre’s face for a second at the question, though it was quickly replaced by a wide grin when Heero turned the second pitch into a double. I half expected Quatre to stick his tongue out at the other team. ‘They weren’t concerned enough about sustainability,’ he told Dave, and Dave gave a sage nod.

The cheer that went up from our side of the bleachers gave me a twinge and I realized I was developing a dull headache. I wondered if I should dig out a ball cap or something before the next game.

At least the wave thing seemed to have been forgotten... that was something. Though that might have more to do with the fact that Sally and her entourage hadn’t made it to the game.

‘What are you reconstructing?’ Bobby wanted to know, and it made me grimace. Winner Enterprises had been heavily involved since the war, with all manner of reconstruction. There had been some trash talk when Quatre had first launched the new division, about blood money and all that crap and I knew he was a little touchy about it. But he didn’t bat an eye.

‘At the moment?’ he said. ‘L3.’

‘All of it?’ Dave wanted to know, all wide-eyed, and it made the rest of us laugh.

‘A colony?’ Bobby chuckled. ‘With wood? Hardly.’

‘Oh yeah...’ Dave muttered, looking a little embarrassed, and we all sat and watched that guy from the last game, Thorpe, get the base hit that let Heero score.

‘We’re currently building five new hospitals,’ Quatre explained, and for a second I saw the fire of a new project in his eyes. ‘It’s phase one of a four stage...’ but then he kind of shook himself, maybe realizing where he was and let it go.

‘Damn,’ Bobby muttered to himself. ‘And I can’t even get my bathroom remodeled.’

We chuckled, but I wasn't really paying attention; something in my head had just fallen into place with a loud clicking sound.

'Wait...' I said, turning to look at Quatre. 'L3? Lumber supplier? You're shipping lumber to L3?'

Quatre raised an eyebrow. 'No... I'm hoarding it in my basement.'

'Smartass,' I grumbled. 'No, seriously... you're shipping lumber to L3? With independent cargo ships?'

'Well it made more sense than the long haul truckers...' he smirked at me.

I hooked an arm around his neck and made a mental note not to strangle him with it. 'Baby brother, we need to have a talk about...'

'What?' Dave interrupted, staring at us wide-eyed. 'You two are... *brothers?!*'

I sighed, but before I could set him straight, Quatre shushed him somewhat theatrically. 'Not so loud! Nobody's supposed to know! The family disowned him!'

I blinked at him stupidly and we all four missed something on the field that had most of the bleachers on their feet.

'Duo?!' Bobby wanted to know, looking from one of us to the other and taking the hook right along with Dave. Only Quatre Winner... wide-eyed, angelic, innocent looking Quatre Winner could have delivered that line and not been laughed at.

'Uh...' I managed. 'I uh... don't like to talk about it.'

It got me an elbow from Quatre, I suppose, for not doing a better job of playing along.

'He *is* the only one in the entire line with brown hair...' he said, letting it hang there, and letting them draw their own conclusions. I think I choked.

The guys just sat and gaped at him.

Well, I *had* been thinking we needed to work on the relationship, but this wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind.

'No, really,' Quatre was telling Dave and Bobby in lowered tones, 'you can't tell *anybody*. The family doesn't realize he's changed his name and is even in the country...'

'Wow,' Dave whispered, staring at me. 'We work with a Winner?'

'No, you work with a *Maxwell*,' I muttered, trying to make it sound bitter. Quatre patted my arm sympathetically.

I put my attention on the game and found Heero sitting on the bench watching us. I gave him a smile and a faint roll of my eyes in Quatre's direction to allay any concerns he might have, because God only knew what we looked like all huddled together and whispering so seriously. Heero did look a little relieved, but equal measures confused. I wanted to welcome him to the club.

'... real name?' I heard Dave ask and Quatre looked around in the most theatrically dramatic way possible before leaning in and whispering, 'Waldo.'

'Waldo Winner?' Dave said, kind of horrified and I saw the moment when Bobby finally realized they were being played.

'Oh bullshit,' he said. I thought for a minute that Dave was going to jump to my defense but Quatre finally lost it and started laughing.

Dave, God love the guy, is the butt of enough jokes because of his innate gullibility, that he at least takes it well. There was a moment of confusion while he caught up, but then he was laughing along with the rest of us.

Somewhere in there, the Preventers had scored three runs and the sides were changing again. I had already put mental money down that our team would be winning this one. Playing to not win every single game was one thing; losing to the same team twice was something else.

‘Hey,’ Bobby suddenly said, ‘I’m gonna go get something to drink; you guys want anything?’

‘Yeah,’ I heard myself say, ‘Bring me a Mt. Dew.’ But then I had to kick myself; wasn’t I giving that stuff up? ‘Uh... make that a water.’

Quatre gave me a funny look, but let it go.

‘So anyway,’ I said, just to keep anybody from giving me a hard time about my addictions, ‘About this cargo ship thing...’

Quatre smirked at me, ‘are you actually trying to schmooze... *Waldo?*’

Jeez, but I sure hoped this was not a nick-name that was going to stick.

‘Well, people keep telling me I have connections,’ I grumbled, seeing the heat in my face reflected in his amused grin. ‘And being strong-armed into talking to *you* is way easier than being strong armed into talking to Jack Lee.’

He snorted, turning his attention back to the field as a Claret Heights player stepped up to the plate. ‘Have anything to do with a ship with the unlikely name of *Buddy’s Gift?*’

I stared at him for a long minute trying to figure out just how in the bloody hell he’d figured that out, and he chuckled.

He didn’t make me ask, maybe even preening a little bit over being one up on me. ‘We watched the Expo, Duo... Maxwell and Brannigan? I have background checks run on all the independents working for Winner Enterprises. The two and two was pretty easy.’

I let that bit of information percolate for a minute while we watched Wufei practically do a high jump to snag a ball out of the air, then turn to shotgun the thing to Heero and another out was won at second. Our half of the crowd went nuts and I winced again. Should have asked Bobby to see if the concession stand had aspirin as well as that stomach stuff.

‘So,’ I finally ventured, feeling like I was starting to catch up, ‘you actually going to make me ask... or do you already have plans?’

He smiled his eerie little board room smile, the one that doesn’t give much away, and it made me wonder how a game of poker would come out. Maybe not quite the way they used to in our lost youth. ‘We’ll see,’ he finally allowed. ‘I have my eye on them. But connections or not... they have to prove they can handle the job.’

It was in me to wax all poetic on my friend’s piloting abilities; complete with stories and examples, but decided that Quatre Winner would probably be more impressed with statistics and flow charts, which I didn’t have on me. He was right; they’d have to prove themselves. It was enough that I knew the job was theirs if they didn’t do something colossally stupid like buzzing a Winner flight tower, or landing on L3 drunk in their underwear. Or... out.

‘Thanks,’ I said instead, more for the fact that he’d recognized my connections before I had, than the actual job offer-to-be.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said, and lost the smug look in favor of a warm smile.

Bobby arrived back and handed around the drinks. I took my water but couldn't help being kind of sorry I hadn't gone ahead with the soda. This really was turning out to be a bitch of a habit to break.

Quatre watched me uncup the bottle and take a swallow, trying to convince myself it was hitting the spot and failing miserably. I wondered why I just couldn't quite reach the zen of intake when it came to drinking.

'You finally giving up the soda habit?' he asked, seeming to find my lack of enthusiasm amusing.

'Yeah,' I muttered, a little bit embarrassed about how difficult a task it had become.

'Cold turkey, I assume?' he guessed, turning his attention back to the field again.

'I guess so,' I replied, capping the water and setting it on the bleachers between us. 'I ODeD myself into insomnia the other night.'

'Certainly explains the headache,' he said, turning his gaze back to me long enough to deliver a kind of smug-asshole grin.

'What?' I said brightly. 'How did you know...?' Did my headaches come with glowing neon signs or some damn thing?

'You've been flinching at every loud noise since I got here,' he laughed, and punched me lightly in the arm. 'Never heard of caffeine withdrawal?'

Well fuck. Heard of it, yeah... thought about it, not so much.

'That would kind of explain a lot...' I mumbled, and knew I was blushing again from his burst of laughter.

But then he just kind of deflated, the laugh trailing off and his weird perpetual look of hesitation was back. I glanced up at him and found his eyes on the bench where the Preventers were trailing in off the field. Or, more specifically, on Heero who was standing there watching us like a hawk about to pick off a baby bunny and make hors d'oeuvres out of it.

Was there no end to the man's over-protective nonsense?

'Stick your tongue out at him,' I blurted in aggravation.

'What?' Quatre said, his voice rising into a tone that wanted to be a squeak and it was his turn to turn beet red.

'He's being a dick,' I said. 'I'd tell you to flip him off, but figured you'd be more likely to stick your tongue out.'

There was a spark of his natural rebelliousness and with a quick look around, he turned back and carefully flipped Heero off. It was fast, and he was still so red you'd have thought he'd been pantsed, but we at least got a laugh out of Wufei.

'Now come on,' I said, elbowing him in the ribs. 'I'm going for a damn soda and kill this headache. Walk with me.'

Bobby and Dave gave me a hard time about not being able to make up my damn mind as we climbed off the bleachers, but I just waved as we walked away. Maybe it was the dull headache that really wasn't all that bad, but just would *not* fade... I don't know, but I was annoyed. And nothing seems to loosen my tongue quite like being peevd.

'You know,' I told him as we walked. 'You and I have enough issues of our own... don't let him add to them.'

The ghost of that hesitation was still there, but he still managed to ask, 'why... why do you suppose that is?'

‘I dunno,’ I had to admit. ‘Background? Time?’ I couldn’t help a glance over my shoulder at the diamond we were walking away from. ‘Interference?’

And a whole damn laundry list of other things, starting with my burn scars and ending with his sister, but some things were maybe best left unspoken.

‘I do get... coached at lot,’ he said, giving his own glance back.

‘They need to back off now,’ I grumbled, including Trowa in the mix, though I didn’t say so, letting him decide just who *they* included.

A look came into his eyes then that seemed a little bit sad. ‘That isn’t all of it though...’

‘No,’ I sighed as we took our place in line at the concession stand, ‘I guess I’m kind of a dick sometimes too.’

He snorted, but kept his peace while I ordered my soda, declined another hot dog, and paid for my purchase. But he was using the time to think about things, and when we turned to head back toward the game, he’d gotten his thoughts in order.

‘You *can* be,’ he said, and it took me a minute to catch back up with the conversation. I gave him a look, but he just grinned. ‘But I don’t think you have been in this case. Just... over-whelmed. And then the intervening started. And now... here we are.’

I stopped walking for a second to uncap my bottle and take two or three big gulps, and damn did it taste good going down. I realized that given half the chance, I could make excuses for continuing to drink the crap forever, and it made me a little bit mad at myself.

‘And here we are,’ I agreed, putting the cap back on the bottle and continuing our walk. ‘So let’s just forget all that crap and decide where we’re going from here, ok?’

He smiled. ‘I think I can manage that. Kid gloves off?’

‘Kid gloves off,’ I granted, and just hoped I wouldn’t be sorry.

There was a picnic table just off to the side of the bleachers and we ended up there for just a little bit of faux privacy. Quatre appropriated my relatively untouched water and we spent the rest of the game with half our attention on the field, just talking about nothing in particular. Not that the weirdness was completely gone, but it felt a whole hell of a lot like it could be gone someday, for the first time in a long time. It was nice.

And I’d been right... Preventers won the game with a rather firm score of ten to one. Maybe the entire team had inner brats?

They had to go do that huddle thing around the pitcher’s mound (see how I’m picking up all the sports jargon?), before they finally broke up and headed out. Quatre was saying something about Trowa and cars, when I looked up to watch Heero walk across the field toward us, Wufei by his side.

They were both looking kind of smug, and kind of sweaty and dusty around the edges. Heero said something and Wufei’s smile took on an edge.

And it suddenly hit me that I was looking at the spirit of L5 in flesh and very human blood right in front of me. What Darryl’s brother had said; Shenlong had been a symbol, and there was her pilot walking toward us. The bat in his hand was suddenly a weapon, and the shine of victory in his eyes was suddenly a much larger victory.

That feeling I'd had when looking at my meager array of L5 art, that something was missing... well, there it was. I wondered if that huge-ass blind-spot had been generated by the knowledge that he would fucking *kill* me for what I was thinking.

But damned if I wouldn't have just about given a kidney for a sketch pad right that moment.

There was some sort of exchange, one I think I even took part in, while my head ran off with thoughts of L5 and Gundams and pilots and spirits and peace and messages and... just how dead would I be if I actually took this notion and ran with it?

Like... zombie sort of dead? Or obliterated sort of dead?

We said our goodbyes and we went our separate ways and I might or might not have given Quatre a sloppy kiss on the cheek and ruffled his hair until he looked like he'd just gotten out of bed.

I think we were half way home before it finally registered that Heero was trying to talk to me and getting more upset by the moment.

'What?' I asked, coming out of the ballroom in my head long enough to notice that there had been some sort of apology for something or other.

'I said I'm sorry,' he blurted, seeing he'd gained my attention.

'For what?' I asked, somewhat confused.

'For...' he began and actually bit his lip for a second. 'Ok; I'm not entirely sure. Whatever I did that made you so mad you forced Quatre to flip me the bird.'

Why did that seem like that happened days ago?

'Oh yeah,' I said, catching up. 'That. Stop stifling Quatre. We were just talking, and you need to stop acting like I'm still made out of cotton candy and will melt if I get wet.'

'All right...' he said slowly, his own confusion kind of evident. 'But if you're not still mad about that... what's wrong?'

I sighed, maybe I needed a mood ring or something so the poor guy could tell 'pissed off' from 'out to lunch'.

'Sorry,' I muttered. 'I think I got hit by a design idea like... with a two by four.'

He took his eyes off the road long enough to glance over at me quizzically. 'Is that good... or bad? I'm having trouble telling.'

It made me chuckle. 'Damned if I know, but if we drive through someplace for dinner, I'll need some extra mashed potatoes.'

He didn't get the movie reference so I got a double order of potatoes from Mr. Bucket and I didn't bother to tell him it was a joke.

Though those damn things are stiff enough you probably *could* sculpt with them if you wanted to. If you left the gravy off.

I didn't try; I'm not a sculptor, I just sucked them down and took myself off to my studio with the intentions of not coming out again until me and my idea had gone two falls out of three.

The war of the blank page. Ideas are a weird damn thing... worse than hamsters. More like ninja butterflies; all bright and exotic and pretty and always dancing at the edge of your vision. And this wanna-be idea was just sort of squatting there in the corner of the room waiting to pummel my ass.

Wufei. Chang Wufei. Pilot 05. The last of his clan. The man who ended the command of Treize Khushrenada. The man who would fucking rip me in half if I made him the subject of *the* memorial of the destruction of L5.

But...

Damn it; he was the pilot of Shenlog. Of Altron. Of... Nataka. One fifth of Operation Meteor. It was kind of all about him. He was the heir of all that L5 had been. The student of the man who pushed the biggest self-destruct button of all time. The recipient of that same man's last, living words.

So I sketched Wufei. And then I sketched Wufei some more. I caught that walk across the ball diamond, and I stood him next to his Master Long. I studied that little wisp of hair that sometimes escapes that ridiculously tight ponytail, and I put a sword in his hand. I imagined him in the cockpit of his Gundam, and imagined him on his training ground. I nestled a white flower in the palm of his hand and then put his dragon fang in that hand.

And by three in the morning I felt like I'd been rummaging in his underwear drawer without his consent, but didn't feel any closer to having my shit together. It was aggravating... like I'd had an epiphany with no real piph. Was it just because I couldn't get passed knowing how Wufei would react? He'd said he trusted me, but somehow... I don't think he'd meant he trusted me to use his good side.

Heero had, obviously, long since gone to bed and I wondered if this art thing was going to end up impacting our relationship. Was I going to turn into one of those eccentric artists that only worked at night? Would Heero just feel like he was living with a ghost that he never saw? Would he get tired of it? Was being a mechanic really all that bad a thing?

I decided about then that I probably needed some sleep, but it was so close to time for Heero to get up, that it hardly seemed fair. I'd just end up disturbing him and he'd never get back to sleep again. So I put my sketch pad away and pulled out my laptop instead. Figured I'd kill an hour or so checking email and reading the news before going on upstairs.

There wasn't anything from Toria yet, but they were probably still in transit. I was kind of glad, because I didn't figure she'd take the terseness of my last message well, and I didn't really feel up to a Brannigan chewing out, virtual or otherwise. There was, however, a reply from Howard.

Not even a hello first? I don't hear from you for weeks and all I get is a single question? Is that any way to treat an old man? I thought I at least managed to teach you some manners when you were still wet behind the ears. Next time I hear from you, there better be some kind of news update or I'll be down there knocking on your door. As for the question... yes; we did recover some scraps of the colony hull. Still got it in storage; can't seem to bring ourselves to do anything with it. Why?

Good damn question. And the answer fell into my head with a crash and a thump that sent hamsters running for the hills. The sound of the piph of my epiphany finally arriving.

I love you too, old man. I replied. *Don't let anything happen to it. I'll be in touch.*

I forgot the rest of my email, I forgot reading the news, and I pretty much stopped caring about going to bed. Kind of wished there was a door on my studio though; I'd have closed it and put a do not disturb sign on it for good measure. The construction

crew would be there at eight and despite knowing that it should be for the last time, and that when they left, our kitchen would be functional... I didn't care, and kind of wished I could cancel them for the day.

But epiphany or not... Heero would kill me for even considering it.

I saw my design in my head and I knew what I was doing, and yeah... Wufei was going to kill me, but it would be a worthy death because sometimes you had to be true to the art. He'd said he trusted me to handle this job, and I could feel that I'd finally got it. This was *right*.

Hard as Wufei had not wanted to influence me, he had been... just not in the way he'd feared. I had to stop worrying about what he was going to think, and I had to just do the job. And the thing that was flowing out of the pencil in my hand was the job. The damn creative block I'd been struggling with all week was gone, and it was like fresh water after an age of subsisting off canteen water.

I built my monument and I revealed it from every angle. I studied the strong face because I wanted to make sure the sculptors who got this job got that expression just right. I'd read up on how this process worked and after I did my 'artistic' take on it, I got down to building the thing from the bones out; there wouldn't be any part of the thing that I didn't show in minute detail. I wouldn't do the three dimensional job, but it would be to my exact specifications.

Heero came into the room about the time the sun came up and there was the sound of an indulgent sigh that announced his presence. I looked up to find him in the doorway, leaning against the jam and giving me this look that was... well, it matched the indulgent sigh, but it mixed in some pride and it mixed in some love and there was that damn faith again.

'This is getting to be a habit,' he said when he saw I wasn't completely off in la-la land. I laid the sketch pad down and went to pin his ass to the wall long enough to kiss him breathless.

'I know,' I told him, 'and I'd be sorry if things weren't going so damn well. I'll cut you in on the commission if you deal with the kitchen crew today.'

He laughed, nuzzling my neck, though I could tell he could tell we weren't really going anywhere. 'If I handle the kitchen crew, do I get to see the design?'

'Nope,' I replied, because... well, I wasn't really sure. But nobody was going to see this thing until I gave it to Aleyah. Hell... maybe I wouldn't let anybody see it until it was real and solid the way I saw it in my head. The sketches were the framework of it, but the whole was going to be so much more. And I wasn't sure I wanted to have that spoiled by anybody looking at it all... flat.

Standing there with Heero's arms hooked loosely around my waist, nose to nose, with him wearing that damn fine-to-see *proud* expression... I was a little surprised to realize I was getting kind of excited about this project. It didn't just make me want to hide under the bed until it was over. I really wanted to deliver the finished work and explain to Aleyah all the nuances and just how it needed to be.

Almost excited enough to forget about the part where I was going to have to show it to Wufei at some point.

'Are you going to be able to love a weird, eccentric, erratic artist type guy?' I asked, because I really wanted to make sure of that part. Kind of wanted to make sure he'd thought that part through.

He just smiled. 'I married you, didn't I?'

'Guess you're stuck with me then,' I said and reflected that it was really too bad that there were people due on our front porch any time.

He caught my face between his hands and gave me a softer kiss. 'That I am,' he said, before letting me go and taking himself off to find breakfast. He even brought me a ration bar, tossing it to me from the doorway to make sure he didn't see anything he wasn't supposed to. It made me laugh.

I heard him let the crew in and they went right to work, but somehow their voices didn't bother me knowing that Heero was keeping an eye on things. If there were questions, or conversation that needed to be made, I didn't have to care.

It took me the rest of the morning and then there was a nap. After that came a quick lunch with Heero before I headed back to the studio. I wanted it all down while the image still burned behind my retina like I'd really seen it. I saw this damn thing like it was a memory, and while I certainly wasn't going to lose the picture as well documented as it already was, I was afraid of losing the spark of it. I've read that the creative process is very much a 'use it or lose it' kind of thing. When your inner muse or hamster or butterfly offers up an idea, if you don't do something with it, all you're doing is training the muse not to bother making offers.

It was late by the time I closed the cover on that sketch pad and felt with a certainty that I was done. I became aware that I smelled something that awoke a beast in my belly and made it growl, and I wandered out to find Heero in the kitchen, christening our new stove. I was exhausted, but in a good way. An accomplished way.

'The artist emerges,' Heero quipped and I was apparently just in time for the serving up part. I felt bad... I'd only been vaguely aware of the crew finishing up and I hadn't even come out to say goodbye. I sat down at the table and looked around.

'I can't believe it's finally done,' I said and had my fork in my hand practically before he put my plate in front of me.

'The project or the kitchen,' he had to ask and I snorted.

'Both, I guess.' I couldn't stop looking around at the shiny new doneness.

'You know the suspense is killing me?' he grinned.

'Sorry,' I said, bringing my attention back to the table. 'I just don't want it spoiled... you know?'

'Spoiled?' Guess he didn't know.

'It's going to be so much more when it's sculpted,' I said, kind of groping around for words. 'The first sight is going to have this... impact. I hope. But knowing what to expect before hand is going to take that away, see?'

It took him a minute, but then he smiled. 'I think I understand.'

Then food was consumed and it was wonderful in that it was not bucket chicken and it was not pizza and... ok, I'll admit it... it was not a ration bar. It was hot and fresh and Heero had cooked it and it stilled the growl in my middle. But then all I cared about was bed.

Heero spooned at my back and I was vaguely aware that he was more than just a little interested, but all I could do was apologize as I was already dribbling the last of my brain cells away.

‘It’s ok,’ he chuckled, all warm and throaty, kissing my shoulder. ‘But if you get out of this bed in the morning without waking me, I will hunt you down wherever you are and have my wicked way with you.’

‘S’deal,’ I said. Or thought I said. Or meant to say.

I slept the sleep of the righteously exhausted, which felt really dumb considering all I’d done was sit on my ass and draw. How very grueling for me.

The night had not dulled Heero’s interest any at all and there was some wicked ways indulged in before breakfast, so I at least managed to not call Aleyah until mid-morning. I had debated waiting, as it was technically the weekend, but as it turned out, Aleyah was every bit as excited to see it, as I was to present it. Or... excited in that breezy Aleyah kind of way. Not like she said *Yippee* or anything, but the fact that I found myself heading into the gallery on a Saturday for a lunch meeting, kind of indicated her impatience to see the goods.

Walking into the building with my sketch pad under my arm, I realized I probably needed something to carry crap in. What’d they call those things? Portfolios? Something besides my armpit anyway... I didn’t feel particularly professional.

Whoever was working the front desk was in the side gallery talking to an art peruser, but I knew the way. On the ride up the elevator, still contemplating portfolios and the purchase of said, I realized... once again, we’d never talked payment. I wanted to feel lame and stupid; I *had* been a real honest-to-god businessman once upon a time, but... the money part was Aleyah’s job. Guess I just trusted she was doing it.

Ms Tartan did not appear to work weekends, so I just headed to where I knew Aleyah’s office was. From inside I heard a one-side conversation and realized my patron was on the phone.

‘...be the first to know, Stanley dear,’ she was saying, her voice tinged with just a hint of some sort of impatience. I hesitated, realizing I probably hadn’t been announced. There was a silence while she listened and then an exasperated gust of breath. ‘We discussed this... at great length, I might add. You agreed with Jacks’ and my assessment. We’re nowhere near the deadline...’

It dawned on me that the topic of conversation was probably my own little self and the project of the moment. And pretty damn obvious that the good Mr. Kirby was not being enlightened that the afore-mentioned project was about to be turned in.

Laugh if you will, but it took me a baffled moment to realize... Aleyah wasn’t telling anybody anything until she’d seen and approved of the design personally. Yeah... I wasn’t there so much to turn the project in, as I was to present the project.

I almost laughed out-loud at my presumptuous ego. It had never occurred to me that this part wasn’t just automatic.

The conversation had ended while I’d had my moment and I hesitated; maybe I should go back downstairs and start over? Have the receptionist call up? But then Coquette trotted out, perhaps catching my scent, and cocked her head at me. Guess that was announcement enough. I paused to tap at the doorframe but Aleyah didn’t look surprised to find me there.

‘Darling, you’re early!’ she said, and I knew we weren’t talking about my punctuality in the meeting department. Did I detect a bit of concern there?

‘I could come back closer to the deadline,’ I grinned, ‘if you’d rather?’

‘So impertinent!’ she huffed, but gestured me to a seat in a manner that really did seem to have a tiny hint of impatience to it. I went in and grabbed one of the ‘guest’ chairs and pulled it around to her side of the desk... I wanted us both to have the same perspective while I gave my presentation. And yes, the eyebrow was arched, but there wasn’t any reprimand.

Then I proceeded to present the fuck out of that sketch pad. With hand waving and grand gestures and maybe even a comic-booky sound effect or two. Because I wanted her to see the damn thing as clearly as I saw the damn thing, right down to the finest detail.

And no... I’m not going in to that detail; I said nobody was going to see the thing but the boss(es) until the unveiling, and I meant it.

But she did. Hell, she probably would have without all the kapow stuff... she’d certainly ‘gotten’ a lot of my other art when I wouldn’t have expected it. And I was delighted to see her eyes shine with the image.

‘You have out-done yourself, Pet,’ she told me when I finally shut up. ‘It is... everything I’d hoped for.’

It was weird to get that kind of total affirmation from Aleyah Winner; I had to bite my tongue on the ‘Really?’ that wanted to come out of my mouth.

Unfortunately, there weren’t any better words set to come out in the absence of the knee-jerk one, and there was a pause that made her snort that little noise of derision.

‘Have faith in yourself, my dear,’ she said, patting my knee. ‘This is some of your best work to date. It is exactly what we were looking for.’

I tried really hard not to grin at her like a five-year-old being given a cookie.

She laughed at me some more.

‘So what happens now?’

‘There are two other approvals that have to be given,’ she informed me, kind of popping my bubble. ‘And then the sculpting process. But your part, my Pet... is done for now.’

She’d kind of breezed over that approval thing like it was a non-issue, so I bit my tongue and didn’t ask her what she thought her two cohorts would have to say. She probably wouldn’t have told me anyway. Instead, I went where I don’t think she was expecting.

‘I’m going to need a small favor,’ I said, and watched that eyebrow make the arch I’d come to recognize as a prompt to get on with it. ‘I need access to the show before the unveiling. I can’t let Wufei... I mean, he has to have some privacy when he sees this... you know?’

She gave me a smile then, unlike I’d ever seen from her before. Kind of soft, and almost motherly, and maybe just a little bit sad. And fleeting as the wind. ‘Of course, dear,’ was all she said. ‘Now run along... I want to call Stanley and rub this little jewel in his face.’

At least... that’s what I thought she said. I blinked at her for a second and said, ‘Pardon?’

‘Off with you, Pet,’ she said, and it was a completely different smile.

So I put the chair back where I’d found it and ‘ran along’.

I would say that the next couple of months were the longest of my life, but... well, with my sordid history, that just wouldn’t be true. But it sure felt like it at the time.

On one level it was a series of events, mixed with the mundanity of day to day life. And on another level it was the anxiety of waiting for this Thing to come into being with excruciating slowness.

It must not have taken long for Aleyah to get the sign-off from her two partners because Monday morning I got a call from Ms Tartan asking for my banking information. Monday evening, it was a good thing Heero was there when I saw the deposit, because I suddenly felt the need to sit down, and I hadn't noticed the lack of a chair.

The career change was a keeper.

There were two long weeks of the old career in there, where I was the model of model employees, that ended with a send-off party in the bay. I kind of suspected it was the guys having a reason to get out of work for an afternoon, but there were balloons and a cake and I was presented with a hammer that Dave had gotten some buddy of his to electroplate in some manner so it looked gold. It had my name engraved on a little plate on the handle with my start date and my retirement date and I hated to tell them it kind of looked like I'd died. And the rest of the afternoon was full of 'hammer mechanic' jokes.

I haggled with Toria through a series of emails and we settled on a rendezvous two days after the show was scheduled to open. I'd ride along on the L3 loop, paint her babies, and hopefully put some of the woman's suspicions to rest. Heero wasn't thrilled, but we'd agreed to just not talk about it. I think he'd accepted it like you accepted company physicals; a thing that just needed to be gotten through. And there was enough else going on in my life, that I could just file it under 'later' in my head and not think about it at all.

I approached Wufei and tried to talk to him, but he intuitively 'got' the spoiling part that Heero had needed a moment to see... and he just flat refused to talk to me on the subject. I kind of felt like, on some deep down level, he had his fingers in his ears and was going 'la la la'. Maybe if he ignored it, it would all just go away. That Chang Wufei might have an inner child was a thing just too difficult to contemplate.

There were ballgames, and laundry, and yard work. I took a couple of hundred bucks from my latest commission windfall and finally bought myself a small little stereo for the studio so I could play my music without blasting Heero out of the house. We bought new curtains for the little kitchen window. The dead apple tree came the rest of the way down and we agreed that we would plant another in the same area.

But behind it all was this slow, anxiety-inducing tick-tick-tick down to the opening. It wasn't completely out of my hands; I did get to sign-off on the preliminary sculpt and make a few last minute adjustments. And the nail-biting part seemed to do something for my productivity, as I turned in four or five other pieces for the show.

But yeah... when I look back on that time, all I really remember is the waiting. And the wanting to throw up part.

You can thank me later for sparing you the blow by blow narrative of those two months and just getting the hell on with it. I think we can all agree it's taken long enough getting to this part in the tale.

So... the night before the big day, I picked Wufei up at his place and drove us down to the gallery. I'd been down there most of the day myself, helping with the setup and making sure everything was just the way I wanted it, and when all the other workers had gone home, Aleyah had pressed a key to the gallery into my hand, patted my cheek and said, 'Be prompt tomorrow, Pet. And please don't over-dress this time.'

There was not a lot of talking on that drive; I think Wufei was just trying to gear himself up for it, and I was afraid my mouth would run away and spout inappropriate crap like it tends to when I'm nervous. Because God damn was I nervous.

I wasn't about to make the guy walk three blocks to see this, so I parked right the hell out front and just dared anybody to look twice at my doofy car. Though it was late and most of the businesses in the area were closed for the night anyway, including Expressions.

I turned off the car and we just kind of sat there for a long minute, staring at the front doors and the light spilling out onto the sidewalk.

I don't know what he was thinking about, but I was remembering my first look at the thing after the foundry finished their part. It had looked exactly the way I 'remembered' seeing it in my head and I'd been... pleased.

'I'm proud of the damn thing,' I heard myself tell him. 'At the same time I'm terrified you're going to want to punch me.'

He stopped staring at the door then, and stared at me instead. 'That... is not reassuring,' he said.

'I know,' I replied and then we got out of the car and went in.

We'd left all the lights on, just the way it would be when the show opened the next day. The memorial was in the center of the gallery, so not immediately visible, and Wufei looked around in confusion as we walked through the first arch.

Aleyah had embraced my idea and the gallery was filled with hundreds of pieces of art... paintings and sketches. Photographs, pottery and fiber works. Metal works. If there was a medium unrepresented, I don't know what it was.

'I don't understand...' Wufei breathed, his voice as soft as if we were in a library. I made mine match his because it was that kind of moment.

'Artists of L5,' I told him. 'It's more than just the memorial... it's an entire show, put on by your people. And... well... me.'

He looked at me with his eyes all wide and his inner little boy was right there behind them. It was that kid I took by the wrist and lead unresisting into the main room.

Eventually, the memorial would be in an outdoor venue, but for the unveiling, the gallery had been opened up into a vaulted ceiling for the most space. The sculpture sat dead center and I brought Wufei to it, letting go of his wrist when I had him where I wanted him and then I just let him look.

The base is an actual piece of the colony hull, and when Howard had found out what I wanted it for, he didn't even charge Aleyah for it. Just kind of seemed relieved to find out that he'd been keeping it all that time for a real purpose.

It's scorched and it's ragged on one edge with part of the designation barely visible if you know where to look. The statue is life-sized and mounted to the skin of that hull. It is down on one knee and the curved sword in its hand pierces the hull in a rent we didn't have to entirely put there.

The expression on her face is... fierce.

Nataku.

Who else to embody the spirit of a people but their guardian?

And who else to model Nataku after, than the girl who had taken the name?

She was no child now; no pig tails and no unfocused temper. She was everything Long Meilan would have grown to be... strong, rebellious, beautiful, determined, proud. The heart of a people who would not be used.

I can't tell you how long we stood there staring at her before Wufei, his voice thin and utterly unsteady, said, '...Duo....'

'Wait,' I answered and pulled the remote out of my pocket that would trigger the rest of it. 'You have to see it all first. Once a day, at the exact moment of the... anniversary... it will be dusk in Sanc... this will activate.' And I pressed the button.

The lights in the gallery dimmed and light flooded up from the gash in the hull at the feet of the statue. Around her, in perfect mimic of her pose, the ghost of the Shenlong appeared. I heard Wufei gasp. But then the Gundam shivered and broke apart and thousands of tiny white birds flew into the heavens of the gallery leaving only that pillar of light. Where it washed across the features of Nataka, the expression of fierce purpose became one of... joy.

I was... damn proud of her.

I stole a glance across at Wufei and was surprised and yet... not, to find his face awash with tears. I'm not even sure he was aware of it; he was just staring, completely rapt.

I tried really hard to keep my mouth shut, but I eventually couldn't help it. 'Please tell me it's ok?'

The expression of surprise that came over him then pretty much gave me my answer, but he tried to reassure me anyway. 'Duo...' he said, but it made his voice crack so he stopped. There was a tight nod, and he tried to speak again, but then his breath hitched and he started to turn away.

I couldn't quite handle the sight of him hiding from what was bubbling up inside him and I reached out in remembrance of all the times this man had been there for me. We ended up in a heap on the floor in front the glow of the funeral pyre I'd given him, and I held him while he mourned losses so deep and so old, they'd shaped his soul. The kind of losses I understood intimately well. The ones that there had never quite been the time, in the middle of a war, to grieve over.

Later, sitting on the floor against the gallery wall, shoulder to shoulder and with the ghost of his wife there in front of us... he told me how she died. It chilled me and made me glad that around the curve of the gallery, my portrait of his field of flowers was already tagged as being from the private collection of Chang Wufei.

We talked for hours. He told me more about his childhood and I confessed that I'd looked up the census records. He seemed taken aback, but not shocked. Perhaps he had remembered they were there. He asked about the creative process and I told him some of the amusing stories, but never admitted how close I'd come to making him the subject. Didn't tell him that his dead wife was such a force of nature that she'd given me bad dreams.

At length, after he'd taken the remote and run the cycle a second time, watching that 'kapow' moment, he shut it all down, to contemplate the statue without the bells and whistles. I was surprised when he let out with a tiny sound that held a touch of wry amusement.

'She would be so smug right now,' he said. I had to agree, though I didn't say so because... I'd never actually met the girl. Not for real.

He got pensive then, and it took him a few minutes to work out just what he wanted to say before he blurted, ‘Duo... could I have a few minutes...?’

‘Absolutely,’ I replied and removed myself to another part of the gallery to give him some space. I heard him get to his feet before I was around the bend into the exit chamber.

There were probably fifty artists represented in that gallery show, and Aleyah had grouped each one’s work with little biography placards. I’m almost embarrassed to admit how disappointed I’d been not to see a single Chang. The entire show, quite frankly... had been for Wufei. If I could have tied a bow to it and handed it to him in a box, it could not have been any more the gift it was. And somewhere in my heart of hearts, I’d been keeping the secret fantasy that the call Aleyah had sent out would shake up some long lost relative for him. Some great uncle or distant cousin. There were one or two Longs, but among the Chens and the Hsus... there were no Changs.

Well... just the one, because I’d have been damned if Wufei wasn’t going to be represented here. His photography was as much an art as anyone else’s, and his portrait of the five of us... the pieces of Operation Meteor... was as much a part of the history we were currently surrounded with as any of it.

His little ‘area’ was dead center behind the memorial. Mine was in the exit chamber, because I hadn’t quite felt right having my pieces mixed in with the rest. I was, no matter the job I’d done or not done... an outsider. That’s where I stood, waiting for him to make his peace, and looking around... well, I felt good. I was happy with what I’d accomplished. Most of the works there were the property of Chang Wufei, as far as I was concerned. Assuming he wanted any of them. All my preliminary pieces were there with the exception of the highly inappropriate Long Frog. That piece would never see the light of day. Wufei’s field of flowers... the colony study... Meilan’s portrait... all there. Matted and framed under Aleyah’s careful direction and looking so damn professional it made me want to laugh. There were several pieces depicting Wufei as well; the cream of the crop from my night of creative insanity. Wufei meditating in the palm of the hand of his Gundam; a white flower in the palm of his own hand. And the piece I hoped would meet part of his burning desire to create his own art... a portrait of Wufei and his wife Meilan. I had thought to draw their wedding picture, but when pencil had met paper, what had bled into form were two warriors standing firm, back to back. They were as they had been... Wufei’s picture had been in that census database too. Faces young, and yet wise. She dark, he light. Bracing and guarding. Determination and strength in every line. Not what I had intended, but another work that rang true when I awoke from the creative dream and stepped away.

In the distance I heard the soft sigh of a voice and tried hard not to hear what words a man would have to say to one he has lost.

It was a somber damn night, and yet inside I was... almost giddy with the knowledge that Wufei approved my design and my choices. That when the gallery opened the next day... uh... make that later that day, and the memorial was unveiled for all to see... Wufei wouldn’t want to kick it the way I’d kicked that stupid rock on L2.

I stayed in the side room until I heard the sounds of Wufei walking around and knew he was done, and was looking at the rest of the display. I intended to let him stay as long as he wanted, even if we saw the sun come up from there. I went and found him, and for a time we just wandered the gallery, looking at the unbelievable array of art... all

of it touched in some way, by a moment so profound that it defied rational thought. You couldn't understand it until you stopped trying and just... felt it.

That show... that gallery thrummed with it. A message that had needed a chorus of voices.

Wufei didn't say a word when we passed in front of his section of wall, but paused and managed to look embarrassed and proud all at the same time. And *that* one was tagged from the private collection of Heero Yuy and Duo Maxwell.

I waited until he'd looked his fill before I led him into the exit room, and found I was kind of holding my breath while I watched him take it all in.

Somewhere in there, he had regained his poise and gotten his wide-eyed inner child well in hand. Neat trick that I wished I could emulate with as much grace, but my own inner child wasn't raised as well.

'Duo,' he said, in that library voice again, 'this is... over-whelming. Your talent is unbelievable. I don't understand how you can see so clearly what can't be seen.'

It made me duck my head and I felt the heat creeping up the back of my neck. I raised a hand and rubbed there, trying to hide it. I hated this part; I wanted the attention on the art, not on me. Though it was the field of daises he was staring at anyway, so I dropped my hand again and tried to find a little of his grace.

'Thank you,' I said, just to prove I had some manners. 'The collection is yours... if you want it, I mean.'

'What?' he said, and did turn to me then, looking kind of... less poised. 'Of course I... but I can't accept... I mean...' he staggered to a halt and just stared at me. His eyes had a shine that was making me not sure if I should feel bad, and before I quite knew what he was about, he'd grabbed me up in a bear hug.

'Doh je,' he said, or something very like it. 'Thank you. I... my trust was not misplaced.'

Made my damn knees go weak with relief. Once the show opened, there would be reviews and there would be talk but it wouldn't matter one damn bit how it went. Because the person I'd done it all for was pleased with the results. That's all that counted.

And he hadn't wanted to deck me.

Thankfully, he let go before the moment made me do something stupid, like kiss his cheek or something that would have made the rest of the evening awkward as hell.

'I'm glad,' I said, though that hardly seemed an adequate adjective. 'Ok... maybe ecstatic. Damn relived, at least.'

He chuckled and with a last look around, told me, 'We should go... it's extremely late.'

'Or early,' I grinned, 'depending on how you look at it.'

We kept it to that sort of mindless conversation then, the mood ending when I shut the lights out and locked the door. I think he'd had all the vulnerability he could deal with for one day, and I could hardly blame him.

Funny how I could look at him and see that getting some of that out of his system had been good for him, while knowing I'd have been mortified in his place.

I drove him home and never quite worked up the nerve to ask him if he'd be coming out to the unveiling or not. I hoped he would, but I could understand where it might not be attractive.

When I stopped in front of his apartment, he hesitated before getting out and I could feel him hunting for words. In the end, he seemed to give it up and just said, 'Thank you,' again.

'You are most welcome,' was all I could think to say in return, and then he was gone. The drive home was somehow longer than normal, and kind of weirdly lonely. Maybe it was the lateness of the hour.

Heero had gone to bed, but was wide-awake and had obviously been waiting on pins and needles. 'Well?' he asked, as I undressed and climbed into bed beside him.

'He didn't deck me,' I grinned, seeking out my spot and settling my head on his shoulder.

'Was there... doubt of that?' he said, trying not to sound concerned.

'Maybe?' I said, and chuckled to lighten it. I really didn't think so... not after Wufei's and my last round of decking incidents.

'Is he all right?' he asked, and it made me think maybe I was being a bit of a tease with the information.

'Yeah,' I replied. 'I think so. He approves. He does not hate it. But... it was still kind of a rough evening.'

There was a moment of quiet, while he trailed a hand up and down my arm. 'Are *you* all right?'

'I am,' I told him, and wanted to feel guilty about it after the grinder I'd just run Wufei through. Though... it wasn't really my fault; the memorial hadn't been my idea in the first place, I suppose. 'I think I got it, Heero. He said that he was glad he trusted me with it.'

There is this moment, when a piece of art is first completed, where you can look at it for what it is and feel... accomplished. It's like this shiny 'new' moment before you start noticing all the little things you could have done better.

Somehow, that moment was spinning out for me... I kept waiting for it to fade, but it lingered on. Maybe because this show wasn't all my hand; there were other artists involved, and an entire foundry crew. I didn't feel quite so much like it was all on my shoulders.

Or maybe it was because this time, it was not my own nightmares and demons spattered across the metaphorical canvas. Which was kind of a twisted thing to think, but there you go.

'I can't wait for you to see it, Heero,' I told him, and could kind of tell that it pleased him. I levered up so I could see the kind of smile he was wearing and got a little lost in the look on his face.

Pride. It still shocks me and thrills me to see that in his eyes. Does something almost painful in the center of my chest.

Carefully, I took a fingertip and ran it from the hollow of his throat, across his chest and down his stomach. His breath hitched and his eyelids fluttered closed. I watched carefully what I was doing, making sure I kept the pressure light. He loves it when I touch him with my hands and I'd been trying harder to not let it be such a big deal to me. When I nudged a knee between his legs and he immediately opened his thighs and invited me to lie there... I knew what kind of night it was going to be.

In the end, it was a good thing the show wasn't until the evening; I don't think we were out of bed before almost noon.

Mindful of Aleyah's fashion warning, I dithered that afternoon for a bit over what the hell to wear. So the tux was too much? Mechanic coveralls were probably too crass. Didn't leave a whole lot of variety. Came real damn close to pulling on the 'My inner child wants a cookie' t-shirt just because it had seemed like I should have been running a mental day care lately, but it was a little too impudent even for me. Settled on a dress shirt with a good pair of jeans and called it a day.

Knowing Aleyah, after last time, she was probably prepared with an outfit in the back of the gallery and would make me change if she totally hated what I was wearing anyway.

I needed to find a t-shirt that read 'Starving Artist' for next time.

Somewhere during the drive downtown I kind of lost the high, and started worrying just a little bit about the reception the thing was going to get. Just because Wufei had given her his stamp of approval didn't mean the rest of the world would get it.

'Man,' I muttered looking out the side window and watching the houses go by much, much too fast, 'sure hope this isn't a flop... Aleyah will kill me. And I'll have to listen to Stan Kirby tell everybody he told them so.'

Behind the wheel, Heero kind of chuckled. 'I wondered when your nerves were going to catch up to you.'

Made me snort a laugh. 'Somehow at midnight last night, the unveiling seemed like... I dunno... an anti-climax? A formality?'

'Last night you said it didn't really matter what anybody else thought of it,' He said reasonably.

'Funny how the light of day changes ones perspective.' And it was his turn to laugh. 'You think Wufei will come?'

'He wouldn't miss it for the world,' Heero said and I had to stop watching suburbia blur into downtown just to turn and see what that warmth in his voice was.

'Yeah?' I prompted.

'He's been gearing himself up for this since you first talked to him about it,' I was told. 'For awhile, I think he was half serious about fleeing the city until it was all over, but...' and here he hesitated a moment, as if not sure he should share the next part, 'he wants to be there in support of your work.'

A decision made before he'd even seen the damn thing.

Wow.

Sure hope he wasn't sorry about that choice now. Maybe I should have told him he didn't have to? Or... had I? It had been a long night; maybe I had.

'Wonder who all else is going to be there?' I mused and Heero laughed again.

'Easier to wonder who won't,' he teased.

And then it was show time.

We were, as I had been warned, 'prompt', and had to be let in by one of the black dress squad. There was the usual pre-opening hustle and bustle, the placing of the flowers... some kind of lush blue thing this time; something I didn't recognize but then I'm far from a horticulturist. This was always a last minute ritual, I had found, to make sure the flowers were as fresh as possible. The gallery was filled with the faint, sweet smell of them.

I pulled Heero through the dance they were making, around into the main gallery and brought him to a stop in front of the memorial, just as I'd done with Wufei, and kind of watched him look.

It didn't hit him the way it had Wufei, of course, but it hit him all the same.

'Damn, Duo...' he breathed, not quite able to look away from the face of L5 long enough to look at me.

'Is that a good damn?' I asked, keeping my voice low so that the half a dozen witnesses buzzing around us weren't also eavesdroppers.

'Yeah.' He said, and it was a word that was just full of other stuff that wanted saying, but would have to do in front of other people. He did tear his gaze away then, to look over at me. 'Yeah... it is.'

And really... what else could I ask for? In the grand scheme of things, there weren't a lot of opinions that mattered to me here; that Aleyah, Wufei, and Heero thought I'd done a good job was pretty much all that counted.

Well... and Stan Kirby. Because as either Aleyah had said, or I'd thought... I wanted to rub his nose in it.

'I better check in with Aleyah,' I told him then, and left him to look around while I hunted down the ringmaster of this circus.

It was a whirlwind opening, more so than my own, and dear lord but Heero had been right... when those doors opened, it was a who's who of our history; Wufei and Sally, Trowa and Quatre, Zechs and Noin, Relena escorted by good ol' Paragon. Even Lady Une. It was trippy.

There was the meeting and greeting stuff, of course, but in between, I just watched people.

Wufei had come in traditional garb; the white I remembered from the war. He and Sally drifted around the room together and I could see him telling her stories as they looked at some of the photographs. He seemed... I don't know... not as tense as I'd expected him to be. There was a peace in him that I hadn't thought to see on that day of all days. But I suppose he'd had the night to get his inner child in line. Wufei would have made a hell of a poker player; I knew him well enough to know that his composure would be iron clad for the duration. I hoped that peace was more than skin deep.

Quatre had to come and hug me and leak in my general direction a bit, the whole thing seeming to press on his sensitivity in another thing I hadn't anticipated.

'She's just beautiful, Duo,' he told me... the first person to speak to me of the memorial in a humanizing way.

Trowa was right there at his side, supplying a kind of gentle support. Quatre's state seeming to bring out his protective tendencies. Again, I was struck by how they had no problem presenting themselves to the world firmly as a couple.

'Excellent work,' he interjected and bent his head toward the statue. 'That base... is that what it looks like?'

I couldn't help grinning at him, the first to notice. 'Yeah; the Sweepers had salvage still; Howard was more than happy to donate it to the cause.'

He pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. 'It all came together perfectly.'

'And Wufei seems pleased?' Quatre said, and we all three glanced that way, watching Wufei and Sally as Noin joined them in front of Wufei's display.

'He is,' I confirmed. 'I brought him out last night for a... private viewing.'

They both seemed happy to hear it; almost relieved, really. They wandered off to talk with Wufei himself for a bit and I found myself with Lady Une standing at my elbow.

‘I suppose,’ she said by way of introduction, ‘I can understand why a mechanic’s position wasn’t enough to keep your interest, Mr. Maxwell.’

I chuckled and gave her a nod of greeting. ‘Not that it wasn’t interesting, Ma’am,’ I replied, ‘but it was starting to interfere with what turned out to be my day job.’

She laughed out right, not bothering to even look like she was trying to stifle it. ‘And a much more lucrative day job it is. Though I do believe you broke Mr. Jones’ heart.’

Oh man... I’d kind of forgotten about the guy. I wondered if he was there or not, or... maybe opening night was a ‘by invitation’ only kind of thing. Wonder if he rated? To be honest... I kind of hoped not; he was something of a fan. He’d probably end up explaining the nuances of my own work to me.

‘Well,’ I quipped, ‘I suppose you could call me in on consults, but... I’m afraid I’ll be a little pricier than a mechanic’s salary.’

She laughed again, not caring when several people looked our way, just saluted me with the champagne glass she was holding, said ‘I’ll keep that in mind,’ and took her leave.

Weird damn evening.

It was quite the crowd, and I managed to lose myself in it for awhile, just wandering around and catching snippets of conversation, pleased that half of it was about the rest of the show, that unlike last time... the focus wasn’t all on the artist of the moment. Made the whole affair easier to deal with. Across the gallery, I saw Wufei in conversation with someone who was obviously of Chinese decent, Trowa and Quatre standing with them. Might have been one of the other artists. I entertained a fantasy that it was one of the other photographers complementing his work and... I don’t know, maybe they’d form a friendship or something. Something that would help ease the pain he’d laid bare in front of me just the night before. Sally wasn’t with them, and when I looked around for her, I found her standing right in front of the memorial, regarding it thoughtfully. I went to join her.

She had one of the champagne glasses, sipping from it occasionally. The atmosphere around her was... strange. Strange enough that she had herself a little oasis of personal space. I stepped into it and though she didn’t turn toward me, she instantly acknowledged my presence. Before I could speak, she gave out with a weird little sound that was trying for amusement.

‘It’s fantastic work, Duo,’ she said. ‘She’s... beautiful. No damn wonder I could never quite compete.’

It was not anywhere in the realm of things I’d been expecting her to say. If I’d been asked to list out the top hundred possible things... I would not have even come close. So I floundered.

‘Sorry,’ she murmured, having the grace to look embarrassed, and glanced over at me. ‘How about I try that again. Fantastic work, Duo. You did a beautiful job.’

Well damn. I remembered Wufei telling me that he’d not told Sally about his dead wife, or perhaps I’d misunderstood the part he hadn’t shared?

Whatever, I couldn't just stand there and let *that* get swept under the rug. I moved in and slipped an arm around her in a hug.

'Come on, M'lady,' I told her. 'Like I'm going to ignore a line like that.'

She snorted, and she sighed, and then she kind of hung her head.

'You're getting as bad as the rest of them,' she said, taking another sip of her drink, but at least returning the hug.

'I don't think it's a competition,' I told her.

She sighed again. 'Feels like it,' she murmured. 'I love Wufei dearly, but... there's always been a shadow there. And seeing him here tonight... I know, somehow, that she's that shadow. That ghost.'

I didn't know what in the hell to say. Kind of bugged me, really, that I was in a position to give her information about her boyfriend that she didn't have. Shouldn't her relationship with Wufei have been closer than mine?

But then... looking back... I could remember a time of talking to Trowa about things I didn't feel I could share with Heero.

'Who is she, Duo?' she asked and I just flat choked. I wanted to tell her; wanted to give her the whole story and hand her the key to understanding a part of her partner she obviously didn't. But... it was not my story to tell and Wufei had specifically asked me to keep it to myself. I couldn't betray that trust no matter how much the confusion in her eyes begged me to. I was opening my mouth to say, 'Nataku' when another voice joined the conversation.

'My wife,' Wufei said, and Sally forgot I was there. That calm I'd seen in him earlier seemed to still be there, and his expression was for her and it was sad and it was loving and it was sorry, and I left them alone to have what would probably be a hard conversation. It was not my place.

Somehow Sally's champagne glass had ended up in my hand, and I took it with me as I walked on. Just a prop and I swirled the liquid for awhile, trying for a contemplative look, but soon found it a bother and dropped it off with the next tray carrying young lady who ventured by. Ahead of me, in the curve of the gallery, I caught a glimpse of platinum blond and realized I was about to cross paths with Zechs. Remembering my last meeting with the man, I reversed engines in a hard veer to port and almost ran Relena over.

'Whoa, Princess,' I blurted, 'sorry about that! Didn't see you there.'

'Mr. Maxwell,' she greeted with a funny little grin. 'Do I mistake what I'm seeing or are you running away from my brother?'

'I wouldn't call it running away,' I protested, feeling my face heat up. 'Just... a prudent delay in a conversation that could be... loud.'

She kind of giggled and then hooked my arm to lead me back down the gallery. I was relieved to see that Wufei and Sally had taken their conversation elsewhere.

'I suppose this isn't the place for him to apologize,' she said airily.

'Pardon me?' I had to ask, giving her my dumbfounded look. 'Are you serious? I'm the one who decked him, if you will recall? If there's an apology owed, it's probably me. I guess.'

'Such conviction there,' she teased, leading us back to stop in front of the sculpture. 'You saved my life, and from one of his own. He was a complete cad that day. If an apology is owed... he owes it.'

‘Somehow I can’t see that happening,’ I muttered and then, ‘Cad? Really? Is that the best you can do?’

She wasn’t like Lady Une and made the effort to stifle the laugh. ‘Please; we are in a public place.’

‘That we are,’ I agreed, and then dropped it. ‘So... the little lady here is going to end up living at your place, I hear?’

She looked up at the statue with a little frown and I suddenly wondered if she approved of it. Wondered if she had a choice.

‘Uh... is that ok with you?’ Not like I could do anything about it at that point, other than maybe feel a little bad over it, but I was kind of interested in her opinion.

She gave me the raised eyebrow look that spoke of an understanding of the absurdity of the question. But she didn’t say anything, turning back to the statue and kind of tilting her head to look at it, like it was going to give her a different perspective.

‘It doesn’t have a lot to say about peace,’ is what she finally said.

I turned to gaze up at my creation. Funny how I’d never really stopped to think about what Relena would think. I’d been told that the final home for the thing would be in Sanc, but somehow she’d been so far off my radar, I hadn’t even wondered about her thoughts on the matter. Guess I could understand why the Queen of Pacifists wasn’t exactly thrilled with the L5 sacrifice being embodied by a warrior Goddess.

I didn’t bother to explain that the project had not been about peace in the first place... it had taken me long enough to figure that out myself.

‘It says that peace is hard won,’ I said. ‘And a fragile thing.’

She did not look convinced, and was just opening her mouth to argue her point when there was the sound of a chime. My patron and her two partners, all dressed to the nines with a bizarre kind of color coordinated thing going on, were moving front and center for the big show. I pulled Relena back a few paces and positioned her in what I knew was going to be best vantage. ‘Wait here,’ I told her, ‘I have to go find Heero.’

Jack Lee was beginning a speech that I figured would take a few moments, and I took off in search of my missing lover... I didn’t want him to miss the next part. I found him in the exit gallery, looking at my display with Trowa and Quatre. I waved to them and we joined the flow of people heading in to the main gallery. It was going to be impossible for everybody in there to be in a position to see the damn thing, so I knew that first night, after the initial display at the exact appointed time... it would run again, but I kind of wanted Heero and the guys to get to see it the first round. Don’t know why it mattered, but somehow... it did. I was a little nervous about getting us back through the crowd, but then my Patron summoned me and the sea parted before us. I left the others with Relena and answered Aleyah’s call.

I had a moment of fear that she was expecting me to make some damn speech or other, but apparently Mr. Lee had handled that part already and they just wanted to present me. There was a round of polite applause that made me blush to the roots of my hair. Then Aleyah handed me the magic remote control and said, ‘Mr. Maxwell... if you would do the honor?’

So I got to stand there facing my little knot of family, and see their faces while the pyrotechnics went off. Made the whole stupid, complicated, uncomfortable, painful process kind of worth it. And I’d been right... I could not have cared less what any of the rest of those people thought.

Heero was just... enthralled. Quatre's face was flooded with tears. Trowa looked... awestruck. Even Relena seemed to be looking at it in a different way. Her somewhat dour expression had been traded for one that was more... contemplative.

I hoped wherever Wufei and Sally were, that they were really talking things out.

There was another round of applause, this one a little more enthusiastic. On a sudden thought, I snuck a glance at Mr. Kirby and found him with a somewhat smug and happy smile all over his face. I was not completely able to stop the roll of my eyes. I imagined that he would be telling everybody about his faith in my work.

And I supposed it would be in my best interest to smile and nod. Guess every business had its own politics.

I turned and handed the remote back to Aleyah and caught her smiling at me with a possessive air that was quickly gone when she saw me looking her way.

'Do not disappear, Pet,' she commanded. 'There will be photographs later. And we need to schedule a meeting.'

'Meeting?' I asked, confused. Weren't we kind of past all that part? What was to talk about? A debriefing?

'About the book, dear boy,' she said, patting my cheek. 'The Making of the L5 Memorial. There's always a book.'

Well, who knew? 'Yes Ma'am.'

She was done with me for the moment, and after hardy handshakes, so were Mr. Lee and Mr. Kirby. They went their way, and I went to join my group.

As I walked up, Trowa was carefully wiping at Quatre's face, a teasing smile on his own face. I was envious of their easiness... their comfort in their own skins.

I was moved to go and slip an arm around Heero's waist and before I had a chance to second guess myself... I just did it. His arm was instantly around me and the smile I got was pure and happy. It could not have been faked. Maybe it was time I stopped worrying so damn much about blending in.

Hell... I think I'd stopped blending a long time ago.

It still made me feel twitchy, but... at least in that place... nobody was giving us a second glance. In light of a couple of certain recent events... sure as hell wasn't much of me left in the closet anyway.

The rest of the evening was as expected. We wandered and we mingled and we watched the light show a second time. I answered questions and even signed a damn autograph which will never cease to make me feel weird as hell. Pretentiousness at its finest.

I was ready to be done ages before Aleyah was done with me. The other guys had long since gone, and the gallery was closed before she had all the photographs she wanted and I was allowed to leave too.

I settled into the car with a heavy sigh. 'I am so sorry this took so long,' I told Heero, but he just graced me with a warm smile while he went about the business of taking us home.

'I had a good time,' he told me and he wasn't just being polite, you could tell.

We were half way home before it hit me that I would be packing for a trip to L3 the next day, and the nausea kicked in. I refrained from mentioning it. I'm not a complete moron about spoiling moods. Sometimes I do know when to keep my mouth shut. And even better, I sometimes actually do it.

It's funny though, that the 'high' I'd had the night before didn't really follow the opening the way it had Wufei's preview. From everything I'd heard, the reception had overall been positive. People seemed to like the work. Seemed to *get* the work, which I hadn't been sure about.

It gave me hope that I'd be able to handle this job in the long term, because I'd been a little nervous about that... had wondered how I would handle it if someday I displayed something that flopped. But it really didn't seem to matter to me what the majority of the world thought; as long as my core fan club liked my work. The person I was creating for liked it.

'Hey Heero?' I said after we'd driven in companionable silence for awhile.

'Yeah?' he said, glancing my way.

'Promise me you'll always be up front with me about my art?' I asked and he kind of grunted. 'If you think something sucks, tell me it sucks, ok?'

I'd half expected him to sputter out a denial, but he actually took a moment to think through what I was saying before he said, 'I promise,' in a kind of solemn sort of way. And he didn't even ask me what had brought that on.

I grinned at him and we went on home.

Next day, I woke with a burning need to do copious amounts of yard work. Lots and lots of sweaty, tedious, time consuming yard work. I saw Heero come out on the back steps at some point, and he watched me mercilessly hacking at the weeds around the base of the storage shed for a while, and then he just went back in the house.

Guy was learning.

If there was grass on it, I mowed it. If there were weeds on it, I decimated it. If it had limbs, I pruned it. I went through five of our yard waste bags and didn't go back in the house until there wasn't time to do more than shower and go to bed.

Oh... and pack. Would squeeze that in there between the last two as quick as possible and just try really hard not to remember why.

Probably shouldn't have surprised me to come out of the bathroom from taking my shower to find my duffle bag sitting by the bedroom door, all neatly zippered up. I trusted that whatever clothes Heero had stuffed in there would be appropriate for painting in zero gravity.

'Thanks,' I told him sheepishly, and if the towel I was using on my hair kind of kept him from seeing the blush... it was pure coincidence. Really.

I had sort of assumed that the packing had meant he was working with me on the whole 'ignore it until it couldn't be ignored' thing, but... I realized pretty quick; not so much.

He was sitting on the edge of our bed and he had that look on his face that means he's thinking so hard it just has to show. Mostly in that little frown line. I sighed, dropped the towel in the pile we made for dirty clothes by the door and went to stand in front of him.

I made him blink when I used a knuckle to rub over that furrow in his brow. 'When we're old and that line is a permanent wrinkle... I'm going to be consumed with guilt.'

He quirked a half-grin and put his arms around my hips to pull me closer. 'And the gray hairs? Will those make you feel guilty too?'

‘Nah,’ I told him. ‘Because it’ll be more silver, and you’ll look all Sean Connery hot.’

He opened his mouth to voice his incomprehension of the line, but I could see him dismiss it and change tracks. ‘Are we going to talk about this now?’

So much for the idea of spending the evening introducing him to twentieth century spy movies. I sighed and hugged his head to my chest.

‘Hear that?’ I asked. ‘I’m not completely freaked out. I’m not... entirely comfortable, but I’m not about to puke in the bed.’

He snorted a little sound that wasn’t real amusement, more like... an acknowledgement that I’d made a joke. But he wrapped his arms on around me and kind of nuzzled his face more comfortably against my chest and... just listened to my heartbeat.

I played with his hair and tried to think about boring crap.

‘Just tell me why you’re doing this,’ he finally said and it made me blink at the wall.

‘Why?’ I pressed and kind of knew I wasn’t supposed to be going over the itinerary of what we’d be doing during the flight.

‘I want to know you’re going because you want to,’ he said and drew back then to look up at me. ‘And not because you feel like you have to.’

I couldn’t help but grin. ‘And not because Toria is making me?’ I didn’t get the laugh there either. ‘Heero, I may feel an obligation to redo their paintings, but I do not feel like I have to do it while in route to L3.’

‘And you want to do this?’ he asked again, not really happy with the answer.

I moved away, climbing up on the bed beside him, presenting him with my back so he could braid my hair for me. ‘Yeah, I kind of do,’ I said, though I realized that didn’t exactly sound all yeehaw, yippee-skippy thrilled.

It took a second before I felt his hands begin to comb through my wet hair, preparing to braid it out of the way for the night. He didn’t say anything, so I figured the ball was still in my court.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I know you’re not happy with my need to keep throwing myself at a horse suffering with rigor mortis, but... maybe Toria is just a little, tiny bit right?’

‘Can we leave Victoria out of this?’ he asked, almost interrupting me, because I hadn’t quite been done with that thought. ‘I think I’m just not convinced that this isn’t...’

‘All her fault?’ I chuckled and he kind of huffed an unhappy sigh. One that sort of admitted to the irony of him thinking the woman who thought he had me brain-washed, had me brain-washed. It took a lot of work for me not to laugh.

‘No,’ I assured him. ‘This is not all her fault. Yeah, she presented the opportunity, and yeah she may be pressuring me. But this is because I seriously don’t like having this... *hole* in me.’

His hands on my hair were all... *extra* gentle. Made me want to tell him I wasn’t fragile any more, but I didn’t. I knew where his head was, and I suppose I really couldn’t blame him. But he still didn’t quite seem to be ready to take the stupid conversational ball.

‘Look,’ I finally said, ‘when Quatre made that trip to Vancouver, nobody even sneezed. Last time Trowa took off to visit his sister, there wasn’t any huge deal made out of it...’

‘It’s not the same thing,’ he said, and his hand appeared in my line of sight, palm up, asking for the hair tie. I gave it to him. ‘You know why it’s different for you...’

‘Of course I do,’ I said, and bit my tongue on the ‘no fucking duh’ part. ‘But it *shouldn’t* be different for me.’

Done with my hair, he moved out from behind me and crawled up to his side of the bed; I followed and settled on his chest where I could look up at his face.

‘Well,’ I conceded after a moment’s thought on that last line. ‘Maybe not *as* different. I’m never going to be a pilot again, and I don’t want that anyway... I just want to be able to go back out there if I want to, and not have my plans dictated to me by my own fears.’

And why did that finally seem to ease that little furrow of concern?

‘I just worry,’ he said, after thinking about it a minute. ‘I can’t help it... I was there...’

‘I know,’ I soothed, ‘But you know why it was so bad last time.’ I didn’t want to rub salt in that wound, but... yeah; we both knew why that had been such an epic fail. Or what had exacerbated it so bad.

He couldn’t help the pained look, but all he said was, ‘I know.’ In a tone that was full of the *I’m sorry* he didn’t voice out loud.

‘I just want to get over this enough to be able to go to L2 for Christmas if we decide we want to,’ I told him, just leaving that other stuff behind. ‘Or what if I end up having shows somewhere off-planet? I can hardly tell Aleyah Winner I can’t make it because I have issues.’

There was that ease of tensions again. Nothing huge, just something in his eyes that truly did look... soothed.

‘Heero,’ I asked, going with some kind of gut-instinct. ‘You’re not... you’re not worried that I’m going to get out there and decide... what? What’s going on in that head of yours?’

He kind of huffed a sigh, like he hadn’t thought I was picking up on the roil of anxiety that was different than his normal anxiety he seemed to have over me. He dropped his head back so that he was looking up at the ceiling instead of at me and just kind of came out with it. ‘I guess I’m just nervous that you’re... that if you...’

Well, he kind of came out with it. But then he kind of stalled and all the pieces sort of fell into place in my head.

‘Heero Yuy,’ I demanded, ‘are you afraid I’m going to get over this, and go back to salvage work? That I’m going to take off and... leave?’

He couldn’t answer immediately, but when he met my eyes, you could pretty much see it right there. Maybe not that exact scenario, but close enough. Afraid of losing me... one way or the other.

Should probably not have given me a warm fuzzy in the center of my chest like it did.

‘Asshole,’ I grumbled, and kissed him. ‘I’m not going anywhere. I’m not here because I need you... I’m here because I love you.’

He quirked this sappy little effort of a grin that tried valiantly to cover up what a relief that had been for him to hear. ‘Oh, that sounds so very reassuring...’

‘You know what I mean,’ I said and then... well, words didn’t seem like a very good method of communication right then anyway.

He was asleep very soon after, though it took me quite awhile to shut my brain off enough to sleep too. Was kind of surprised to make it through the night without dreams though. Pleasantly surprised, but surprised all the same.

I didn’t even offer to drive myself the next morning, because I knew he’d need to see me off. And while I wasn’t exactly having to give cookies to my inner child, I was glad it was an early morning launch and not an evening one... there wasn’t much yard work left to do.

Dressing the next morning, I was standing in front of the closet debating between the ‘chew through the restraints’ shirt and the ‘flying monkeys’ shirt when Heero came in to the room with probably the bizarrest expression I have ever seen on his face. Embarrassed and smug rolled into something I don’t think I’d ever seen there before.

‘Will you do me a favor?’ he asked, and that was about when I noticed he had one hand behind his back. I will never tell him how my heart dropped into my boots... because that was almost the exact wording he’d used last time when he’d displayed the meds he’d gotten for the L2 trip.

‘What?’ I asked cautiously, half of me not wanting to deny him anything, since he so rarely asked, and half of me spoiling for a fight if a bottle of pills was coming into play in a second.

‘Would you... mind wearing this?’ and he handed me a shirt. It was so not what I’d been expecting that I kind of froze for a minute. ‘If... if you don’t mind.’

‘Heero,’ I had to ask, ‘where in the hell did you even find a ‘I heart Grumpy’ t-shirt?’

‘Ebay,’ he said sheepishly. ‘You can find anything on the internet if you search long enough.’

I took it from his hands and shook it out and couldn’t help the laugh. ‘Oh dear God... this is so perfect. When did I infect you with my twisted sense of humor?’

‘Maybe I have a twisted sense of humor of my own?’ he replied, and the smug was back.

‘When the hell...?’ I asked as I pulled it on, and when my head emerged from the neck hole, he was closer than he had been and helped me smooth it down.

‘Same night we opened the mugs,’ he said, delivering a kiss with the line that was pretty damn possessive. ‘Same night I knew you were making this trip.’

‘You are just so sure of me,’ I grumbled in his ear, and he kind of sighed.

‘Most of the time.’

‘Never doubt me,’ I told him, ignoring the teasing that had been in his voice for what I knew was underneath. ‘This is where I belong and I’ll always come back here.’

‘See you do,’ he commanded, though what was behind his eyes wasn’t nearly as cocky. ‘Now come on... wouldn’t want to start off this trip with Victoria accusing me of trying to make you late.’

There wasn’t much to grab, just my duffle and my paintbox, and Heero assured me that he’d make sure to let Wufei know that I’d used his gift for one of those ‘on site’ deals the guy had been on about.

The drive was only a little bit awkward; Heero did his best to keep the distracting conversational ball in the air, a little too hard sometimes. But I suppose I kept kind of fumbling it on my side, so I was probably throwing him off his game.

‘You sure you’re all right?’ he finally had to ask, after he’d parked and we were sitting in the car staring at a docking field.

‘It’s weird,’ I told him. ‘It’s kind of not as bad being on the commercial side instead of the public side.’ And I wasn’t even lying to make him feel better.

‘More familiar?’ he asked, always trying to delve into my screwy psyche.

‘I don’t know,’ I confessed. ‘That’s part of it, and I think the other part is that I know who’s piloting this time and... it’s somebody I trust.’

But that kind of left me wondering... *I’d* been the fool piloting the first time. Did that mean I didn’t trust myself? When I tried to make that mental shift, imaging myself at the helm, damned if the anxiety level didn’t kick up a little bit. I could do it, I knew I could do it, I’d proved it more than once now. But I didn’t really have any faith in being able to handle a crisis. Even though... I guess I’d managed *that* a couple of times now too. But I was never going to know just which crisis would be the trigger that I finally couldn’t handle. Or... maybe I did know, since there’d been a thing or two I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt I would not have gotten through without Heero there to shore me up and shove my ass in gear. A lot of no-duh crap there, I guess. Just kind of weird to have it all served up at once on a platter with ‘Buddy’s Gift’ scrawled on the side of it.

I became aware of the fact that Heero was holding my hand probably a little tight. I squeezed back and smiled across at him.

‘I’m never going to be able to pilot again,’ I told him. ‘At least not for a living. But... I think I can learn to deal with the rest of it, given enough time.’

He pulled my hand up and kissed the back of my knuckles. ‘You just tell me what you need.’

‘All I need,’ I smiled, ‘is for you to be here when I get back. And not get tired of waiting for me to get my shit together.’

He was probably going to say something equally sappy in return, but the sudden loud slap of a pair of hands on the hood of his car had us both jumping a foot in the air.

‘I’m on a schedule, love-birds!’ Toria hollered at us with a malicious grin plastered across her face. Let’s move it, buddy-boy!’

I think we both glared at her, but she just laughed and flipped us off before turning to saunter back toward their ramp where Hayden stood waiting. He just grinned and waved.

‘She does not seem the slightest bit intimidated to me,’ Heero grumbled and I had to laugh.

‘Come on,’ I said, since the moment was pretty much shot anyway. ‘There is a schedule and I wouldn’t want her having that heap hauled to the field over your car.’

He snorted, but we got out and took my stuff up toward the ramp.

‘Hey,’ Hayden greeted us, shaking Heero’s hand and taking the duffle that he’d been carrying.

‘You need to restrain your wife, man,’ I teased, but he just grinned.

‘Restrain Torie?’ he laughed. ‘You know how well that works!’

And well I did. Probably a lot like trying to restrain Duo Maxwell. Which, looking back, was probably where a whole lot of spacer myths had been born.

‘Well here, my good man,’ I said haughtily, and handed him my artbox to go with the duffle. ‘See this to my cabin, and I expect a mint on the pillow when I get there.’

‘You don’t want to know what’s on your pillow, Maxwell!’ Toria’s voice boomed over the speaker from the ship and the tone of Hayden’s laugh made me nervous.

But he bowed anyway and took my stuff in to give me a moment of obviously not real privacy to say goodbye to Heero. I ignored the invisible audience and turned to watch Heero watching my gear disappear inside with a strange... wistful look.

He wanted to go with me. I could see it in his face as plain as if he’d asked. But... he wouldn’t ask. He understood that this was something I needed to do for myself. Maybe my piloting days were over, but my life did not need to be limited to Earth. I could get myself straightened around that much, I was sure of it. Maybe I couldn’t get back on the horse that had thrown me, but the pony rides were pretty cool too... right?

‘You’ll call when you get in, won’t you?’ he asked, hooking a belt loop and applying just enough pull to let me know what he’d like, but not so much it wasn’t my choice. So I stepped in for the embrace he wanted and damned Toria to say anything.

The ‘Ewwwwwww!’ that resounded over the speaker only made Heero kiss the hell out of me. I grinned at him.

‘I will call,’ I assured him. ‘And I will let you know when we head out.’

But it gave me a funny feeling in my chest when I said it and I thought about my inner child and wondered.

I didn’t really need Heero in order to do this thing. I could turn around and I could walk up that ramp and I could strap myself in and make the launch.

‘Oh gag me, Hayden!’ Toria hollered, making the appropriate sound to go with the line. ‘Now they’re making goo-goo eyes at each other!’

And I could do this because these were my screwy friends and despite that... I trusted them at the helm. We were not heading off for the belt. We were not going out on a suicidal scavenger run. We were just doing the equivalent of driving across state. Just... in a grander scale.

Heero kissed me again, and I would not have bet money that he wasn’t flipping off the camera behind my back.

I did not need Heero in order to do this thing.

But...

What if I wanted Heero? Was that not an all together different thing?

‘You be careful out there,’ he told me softly, gave me a smile and turned to head back down the ramp.

There was a feeling in my chest but it wasn’t fear. I kind of groped that feeling and felt it all the hell up, but... I wasn’t afraid of walking into that ship without Heero there with me. I was going to miss him. I was going to want to share it with him. I was going to regret not being able to dance with him and introduce him to Hayden and Toria’s kids, to give him a chance to know my friends.

Maybe it was time I stopped shoving him away, just to prove I could stand on my own? Maybe I really didn’t need to prove anything to anybody at this point... especially not to myself.

‘Hey!’ I hollered, and he stopped at the bottom of the ramp to look back at me and maybe I imagined the spark of hope in his eyes. Or maybe I didn’t. But it cemented my decision in my mind. ‘Would you... like to come along?’

His answering grin was enough, but he said, ‘I have to go park the car. How long do I have?’

I glanced at my watch, but Toria hollered, ‘Thirty seconds!’ over the speaker behind me. Then Hayden came on and said, ‘Twenty minutes. Plenty of time... I’ll find a second mint. Welcome aboard, Mr. Yuy.’

Heero saluted the ship and headed for the car at a decently fast pace.

I leaned against a strut to wait for him to come back. Figured I’d give Hayden a few minutes to talk to his pissy wife in private. Plus... I didn’t think they’d call for the tow with me still standing on the ramp.

Heero would have to park the car at long term, and was probably calling Wufei already. I wondered what he’d tell him. I wondered if he’d had a contingency plan, just in case. I wondered if there was a second toothbrush and a change of clothes that weren’t mine, in my bag.

When I saw Heero jogging back from the parking lot, his own duffle over his shoulder, I called up the ramp.

‘Queue the music, Spacer-girl, and let’s get this heap of junk moving.’

It took a moment, and I wondered if they were still arguing back there. Well... I’d sweeten Toria’s mood once we got underway and I explained that she was working for my kid brother. She’d learn to like Heero, or I’d know the damn reason why.

I grinned when the music began to play and held out my hand to take Heero’s when he started the climb.

‘You got to go where you wanna go, do what you wanna do, with whoever you wanna do it with....’

This... could maybe even be fun.

The End.

