Summary

Duo returns from holiday to find Wufei missing and the others none the wiser as to why he won't speak to them. Determined to find out why, Duo shamelessly ignores personal boundaries, and finds a situation none of them could have predicted, but which he is determined to help with no matter how difficult it makes things for him.
It would have occurred to no-one that Duo Maxwell would be eager to return to work after a two week ‘holiday’ (helping the Sweepers inventory stock seemed a dubious use of the word) in the Caribbean, but as he bounced through the corridors, darkly tanned with a smattering of brown freckles across his nose, it was almost possible to believe that he was excited to be back. Coffee in one hand, small package wrapped in bright tissue paper in the other, he called out cheerful greetings to people he passed, promises to catch up later but never breaking his stride. Clearly, he had a place to be.

That place was his office, where his partner would be awaiting him with bated breath after a month’s separation. Their holidays had overlapped, with Duo leaving the day before Wufei returned, meaning that it had been four full weeks since he had seen his irascible companion. He was keen to catch up, and compare who had managed to acquire the best awful trinket from a souvenir shop whilst on their travels to add to the collection that was slowly taking over the windowsill of their room.

“Alright, Chang,” he called as he fumbled with the doorknob, “I know you pipped me last time with that creepy-ass doll, but I’ve got the winner here, no dou- oh.”

The office was conspicuously empty. The initial reaction that maybe Wufei was in a meeting was swiftly discarded as Duo walked to his desk and noticed that Wufei’s computer wasn’t even switched on. He tossed the package onto the desk and frowned over at the unoccupied chair whilst he waited for his own machine to start up. Once it did, he scanned through his emails for the expected missive which came on the rare occasion his partner was sick, detailing all the tasks that were due, in order of urgency, with step-by-step instructions and a demand that Duo check in at the end of the day and update him as to what had been completed, and what was outstanding.

Nothing.

Well, not nothing, plenty of work-related emails that he would scan through later. But nothing from Wufei.

Shoulders sagging, Duo tried not to let the disappointment spoil his mood entirely, although he could feel his momentum dropping. He leaned one elbow on his desk and toggled moodily at his lower lip whilst scrolling back through their shared calendar, in case there was something marked in there he’d forgotten about.

Still nothing.

Now that he thought about it, the room smelled slightly stale and stuffy as well. Like no-one had been in here for a while. There was a faint layer of dust visible across the other desk, as he tilted his head into the light.

This was stupid. He needed answers.
“Where is he?”

Heero and Trowa looked up from their computers, to see Duo, hands braced on either side of the door and leaning into their office, looking agitated.

“Good morning, Duo,” Trowa said mildly, face impassive. “Did you have a nice trip?”

Heero snorted and looked back at his computer with a small smirk.

“Lovely, ta,” Duo replied brightly, although his hands were tight on the doorframe and his smile a little tense at the edges. “Where’s Wufei?”

“We had a very peaceful time. Heero’s chilli plant provided its first chilli. We convinced Dean from Tech to eat it on a dare, and he spent the next hour being sick because he didn’t realise it was a ghost chilli –“

“Stop teasing him,” Heero said. “He’s going to rip the doorjamb out.”

“I know nothin’ serious has happened,” Duo said, drumming his fingers against said doorjamb, “’cause you’d’ve called me. An’ I know he’s not quit, ‘cause he’d have called me. So, what? Has he been sent on some urgent solo thing? How long am I gonna be partnerless for?”

At this, both Heero and Trowa stopped typing and shared a look. There was a long pause whilst they deliberated who was going to answer, and Duo could feel the muscles in his neck tightening.

“What?” he demanded impatiently. “What is it?”

“…We don’t know,” Trowa sighed finally, looking back at him with an apologetic expression.

“What d’y you mean, you don’t know?”

“Exactly that,” Heero said. “He got in early on the day he was due back and marched right up to see Une. Spent an hour in there with her, then left without saying anything.”

“We tried to call him but he just texted saying something had come up, and he was busy,” Trowa continued, with a helpless shrug. “Quatre even went round when he was in town last week, and apparently Wufei didn’t even let him through the door. Said they’d catch up later, but he didn’t have time now.”

Duo stared at them blankly for a long moment, and they looked back with sympathy and the resignation of not being able to help as the braided man digested this. They could see the cogs turning whilst he tried to process the information, frown deepening and pout growing more pronounced. He leaned further into the room, letting his arms take his weight as he thought.

“‘Something came up?’ he echoed, finally, disbelief evident in his voice. “The sort of thing that could come up and keep Chang off work for two weeks, after a two week holiday, is usually the sort of thing that’d have all of us scramblin’ to the front lines. What on earth…?”

“Look, Duo,” Trowa interrupted, his tone patient and careful. “Whatever it is, it’s clearly something big, and he clearly wants to keep it private. I know you’re… invested in his wellbeing,” he settled for, grasping a little, and got a derisive snort and an eye roll from Heero, “but maybe it’s best just to give him some time. You said it’d been getting a bit much anyway, that you needed some space…”
“I’ve had my space,” Duo muttered absently, not even looking at Trowa, clearly focussed on trying to puzzle out the mystery of Wufei’s disappearance. “That’s why I went on holiday. I’m fine now. Maybe Sally’ll know!”

“Maybe I’ll know what? Hello, Duo. Goodness, aren’t you brown! Nice holiday?”

As if summoned, Sally had appeared in the corridor behind him with an arm full of files. She nudged him out of the doorway and passed a few of the files to Trowa.

“Er, yes, thanks,” Duo said, obediently stepping aside from her. “D’you know what’s up with Wufei?”

She paused, sighed heavily and turned to face him. The look on her face told him everything before she had even opened her mouth, but even then he still hoped that maybe she’d have some information.

“I tried to get something out of him last week, but he’s not answering his phone. He didn’t answer the door when I went round either.”

“Why are you all letting him get away with this?” he demanded, suddenly frustrated. “He could be sick, he could need help!”

“We’ve tried, Duo-”

“You know what he’s like! You can’t ask him if he wants help, you’ve gotta damn well tell him!”

He stormed out of the room, leaving the others sharing exasperated glances and shrugs.

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It had been a long day. A really long day. Duo had spent the day twitching, counting down the minutes to the end of the day, and restlessly pacing the corridors. If he had to make any more small talk about his holiday he thought he might scream.

He had even tried to get more information out of Une, only to be told that she didn’t have any, and even if she did she wouldn’t tell him. She rather unsympathetically informed him that he could use the time to catch up on his paperwork, and that she’d be happy to supply more if he found himself at a loose end. It hadn’t taken much prompting for him to scarper very quickly at that suggestion.

But the minute 5:00 pm rolled around, Duo was out of the building before his computer had even finished shutting down. He managed to even get out ahead of most of the traffic, and what little there had been, he was able to dodge on his bike. It was only that he knew he needed to calm down a little that he even bothered stopping to lock it up when he got to Wufei’s apartment block after he parked up, taking deep breaths to slow himself down as he focused on getting the chain on.

Climbing the stairs to the second floor, he mentally rehearsed what he was going to say. Offering help, concerned support, calmly and rationally, but making it very clear that he wasn’t going to leave until he had found out what was going on.

That resolve lasted until Wufei opened the door, approximately three inches, with the chain still on. His expression was suspicious, and then when he registered who it was, he looked frustrated.
“Duo,” he said.

“Missed ya at work today,” Duo told him cheerfully, trying to keep things casual. “What’s up?”

“I’m a little busy at the moment,” Wufei said. “I’ve got a lot going on and - we can meet up soon, okay?”

“Not really.” Duo placed his hand flat on the door, smile dropping to a frown. “Come on, Chang, what’s up? No-one seems to know what’s happened to you, you’ve not been seen for two weeks. What the fuck’s goin’ on?”

“I don’t have time right now-”

Duo jammed the steel toe of his boot into the gap in the doorway, stopping Wufei from closing the door, and he leaned in close.

“Trust me, Chang, it’ll take a lot less time if you just let me in and talk to me, than if I have to break in and get the story out of you the hard way.” His voice was a whisper, but it held a lot of promise.

Wufei glowered at him, meeting his eyes squarely and not backing down.

“I’ll do it, you know I will.”

A long pause, and then Wufei dropped his gaze with a resigned sigh. He kicked at Duo’s boot to knock it out of the way, and Duo stepped back and straightened as the door was unchained and then left open for him to follow Wufei into the apartment, closing it behind him.

Trailing down into the living room, he paused on the threshold and let out a low whistle. The usually pristine space was covered in papers and books, half-drunk cups of coffee and tea, and a couple of side-plates with uneaten sandwiches were tucked around the room. A laptop was balanced precariously on the arm of the sofa, the tablet on the coffee table, and his mobile was on the desk on the far side of the room, screens all glowing from where they had been abandoned mid-thought.

Wufei stood in the centre of it all, and now Duo could see more than a sliver of his face, he looked exhausted. Weary, desolate and frustrated. His hair was a mess, his clothes rumpled, and he stood with his shoulders slumped and shadows under his bloodshot eyes.

“Jesus, ‘Fei, what the fuck is going on?”

The other man opened his mouth to answer, then cut himself off with an impatient sigh and gestured at a photograph on the coffee table. Unframed, it was almost hidden under a mess of paper, and Duo unearthed it impatiently, ignoring the irritated noise Wufei made as the papers slid around everywhere.

It was Wufei, taken recently, looking startled, unsure, and entirely overwhelmed. He was holding a bundle of blankets, out of which poked a tiny hand, and the face of a very small, and very disgruntled baby. It did not make things any clearer, and Duo tapped his fingers on the back of it.

“Cute kid,” he said flippantly. “What’s it got to do with anything?”

Yet more silence. Irritated, Duo looked up to demand more explanation, and froze, heart clenching and breath stilling in his throat.
Wufei looked like he was about to cry.

“...Fei?”

He set the picture down and took a hesitant step towards his friend. Wufei let out a growl of frustration and dashed at his eyes with the heel of his hand, winding himself up to his usual prickly stature.

“That’s…” A pause, his voice was shaking. He took a deep breath, tried again. “That’s my daughter.”

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Duo had packed Wufei off to the bathroom to shower, and whilst the water ran he had cleaned up the mugs and plates, straightening up the living room as best he could. He had ordered dinner as well, fairly confident that his friend hadn’t eat more than a few bites a day for the last few days. The books and papers were legal texts, court rulings, and histories of L5. Wufei had clearly grabbed everything he could find, and thrown himself into them.

Half an hour later, when Wufei returned to the living room in clean clothes, his hair damp around his shoulders, he looked a little better, and there was space for them both to sit. And, with a bit of coaxing, he did sit.

“They brought her out a few days before I left,” he explained, finally, a warm mug of green tea clasped in his hands, as he hunched forwards and rested his elbows on his knees. He studied the drink intently, not meeting Duo’s gaze. “They handed her to me with… with no explanation, and when I asked…”

“How?” Duo asked, leg tucked under him and back against the sofa armrest, watching his friend carefully. He just wanted to hold him, to tell him everything would be alright, but that wasn't how their friendship worked. It wasn't how any of Wufei's friendships worked, which was why he had locked himself away, alone, scrabbling for a solution.

It had been well over a year since Wufei had last been to L5, and the baby wasn’t even a month old from what Wufei told him. Had they sent someone to Earth to seduce him, Duo wondered, studying the proud profile in front of him. It probably wouldn’t have been hard to find a volunteer, the Heir to the Dragon Clan would be as prestigious a catch as he was gorgeous (not that Duo was biased in any way), even if he had shown a continual and maddening disinterest in taking up his role. But one fling didn't guarantee a result, and Chang was a hard man to seduce. Duo had watched others try, saw them shot down again and again, and the thought kept him from trying himself, every time he wavered slightly.

That didn't mean Wufei had never indulged, though, he reminded himself. And he had no right to be hurt at the thought of him with anyone else, or that Wufei hadn't told him. He had no claim on his body or secrets, although he liked to think he was Wufei's closest friend.

“When Meilan and I married, we were both in training for the Gundam programme. We underwent a… a number of medical procedures as part of that.” A long mouthful of tea, a slight flinch against the burn of the hot liquid, and knuckles whitening as his grip tightened on the cup. “This is our daughter, and, more importantly as far as they’re concerned, a legitimate and direct heir to the clan.”
“In vitro…” Duo breathed and Wufei nodded tightly.

“They gleefully informed me that they have further… samples,” he spat the word. “Frozen, ready for use should this child not prove sufficient.”

The legal texts made sense.

“You’re suing them.”

“For custody,” Wufei confirmed. “I can’t leave this child - my child - with them. And I won’t have them disrespecting my wife’s memory by creating any more.”

“I want to help.”

The words came out before he even had time to think how he would help, but that didn’t matter. However he could help, he would. Wufei shot him a tired, hollow smile.

“I’m grateful for the offer, but I’m not sure you can. I’m not sure anyone can.”

“Why didn’t you contact Quatre, see if he could get his lawyers-“

“I want as few people involved as possible,” Wufei said, firmly. “I don’t want this spreading around until I know I have a chance. Otherwise it’ll just be pity and rumours, and I can’t stand that.”

“Just you and me, then,” Duo said. “Like always.”

The smile he got for that seemed a little happier. A little.

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Dinner had arrived - a salad for Wufei, ¾ lb burger with fries for Duo, and a shared order of onion rings - and they had sat, eating as their poured over files and paperwork. Wufei, spread across the sofa, Duo on the floor, back against the seat.

“They’re citing clan culture, and they won’t let me take her unless I’m married,” Wufei explained. “Historically, there haven’t been single parents within the clan - if someone became widowed, or divorced, the children were removed to live with family until the parent remarried. Ostensibly it was to help alleviate the pressure, but…” He trailed off, mouth twisting in a thin line and Duo rolled his eyes and snorted.

“So we’re lookin’ for an example of someone who was allowed to be a single parent? Then you can get…” Duo paused, looked puzzled, then ashamed. “What’s her name? I should’a asked that first.”

“She… hasn’t got one, yet.” Wufei looked equally shameful. “They were going to let me name her - they were giving me that honour at least - but I’ve been a bit focussed on other things…”

“Priorities, that’s fair. It’s not like she’ll even know.”

“If we can’t find an example in the clan’s history of a single parent being allowed to keep the child, then I’ve been exploring previous cases where protection of cultural heritage has been overruled,
Duo nodded, chewed on a fry thoughtfully and turned back to the heavy tome he had balanced on his lap. The information was dense, but fairly simple, which gave him time to mull over the mixed emotions swirling through him. A kid - Wufei’s kid - existed in this world, and it was like a punch to the gut knowing that there was another person out there that Wufei had made, knowingly or not. He hadn’t really pictured any of them ending up with children, so that was a gear shift mentally anyway, but that it had happened now, so unexpectedly. Usually there was a bit of time to prepare before a baby arrived, but she was there, already, and needed them.

He watched Wufei out of the corner of his eye. The other man’s fire and determination had been entirely focused on this task - he already had this intense need to love and protect a baby he hadn’t known about until three weeks previously, who he hadn’t consented to have. But she was an innocent in this, and she was his baby, so he was going to get her, keep her safe.

It was so strange to see him like this, and yet weirdly perfect and wonderful, and filled Duo with a wonderful warm ache even as his head spun. He would do anything to make sure Wufei was happy, he always would have done. And now, to protect that little nameless baby, because she was Wufei’s baby, and anything of Wufei’s he would fight and die to keep safe…

It had probably been a ploy to get Wufei to come back to L5 and take up his hereditary role. A hope that parental responsibility would work where clan loyalty had not, if he wasn’t able to get custody Wufei would almost certainly move to be closer to his daughter. Away from Duo.

“Can I see that letter?” he asked, breaking the silence.

It took a moment for the request to filter through, where Wufei looked up and blinked owlishly at him, before his synapses realigned and he located the letter from the clan lawyer and passed it to Duo. He scanned over the contents and hummed thoughtfully.

“I think you’re comin’ at this a bit sideways,” Duo told him.

“What?”

“Well, you’re goin’ through all this to find a way not to get married. Why not just get married?”

Wufei rolled his eyes.

“Yes, it’s that simple. Who on Earth would I marry, Duo? I can’t go out and just grab someone on the street-”

“Me.”

“- to get them to… what?”

“Marry me,” Duo repeated, as Wufei stared at him. “The letter only says you hafta be married. It doesn’t specify how long you’d have to have been married for, or who to.”

“To whom,” Wufei correctly weakly.

“Whatever. Think about it, alright? It’d be a marriage on paper - just to get things sorted. We live together with the kid, but it won’t change anythin’ other than that.” Who was he trying to reassure, he wondered. Wufei, or himself? “And… and you’d still be free to date or whatever. So if you found someone you liked, we could divorce and you could shack up with her. Or him. Whatever.”
The other man just goggled at him for a long moment, mouth working soundlessly. Duo met his eyes and tried to keep his poker face in place. He was doing this for Wufei’s benefit, he told himself firmly. He wasn’t taking advantage – this would be worse for him, anyway, pretending. But it’d help Wufei.

“I couldn’t ask you…”

“You’re not askin’, I’m tellin’ – I’m a consenting adult and I want to marry you. For your daughter.”

“You didn’t want to get married,” Wufei reminded him.

“Guess the right guy just came along,” Duo shot back, fluttering his eyelashes.

“You didn’t want kids.”

“Yeah, ’cause I’m too much of a hot mess to raise ‘em on my own. But look at who I’d be workin’ with! I think you’d cancel me out just fine.”

Wufei sighed, looked around the room as if trying to find an alternative answer. Watching him chew on his lower lip as he thought, Duo could see the cogs turning, and could pinpoint the moment the plan was accepted in the minute relaxing of his shoulders, the twitch of his eyebrows, even as he was clearly still trying to resist the idea.

On an impulse, Duo grabbed one of the last onion rings and twisted himself up onto one knee.

“Chang Wufei,” he declared dramatically, “will you marry me for legal purposes?”

“You’re crazy,” Wufei said, although it was with affection and a tired smile, as Duo grabbed his hand and slid the ring onto the appropriate finger.

“That’s not a nice thing to say to your fiancé-of-convenience,” Duo chided, but grinned cheekily up at him, glad of the smile.

He made to move back to his spot, but Wufei’s fingers tightened around his, holding him in place and clutching his hand, onion ring crunching in the grip. Startled, Duo looked up to see the other man staring at him intensely, seriously. A thrill went down Duo’s spine and his mouth went dry.

“This is an insane idea,” Wufei told him, “but I can’t tell you how much it means that you’ve offered to do this… I’ll do my best to find a solution so you’re not trapped with me for longer than you need to be.”

“Hey, man, don’t -”

“I’m sorry I’m taking advantage of your kindness, and I will work to pay you back. I - we… My daughter and I, are very fortunate to have someone like you in our lives.”

Well shit. Duo’s throat tightened and he pressed his lips together, blinking his eyes against the tears that had suddenly appeared there. Shit.

“You old romantic,” he croaked, waving it off with a joke. “I- oh. I’ve got onion all over my hand.”

“That’s your fault,” Wufei pointed out, looking down at his own hand and realising he was suffering the same problem.

Moment killed, they went to wash their hands and make plans for the future.
Together.

Walking into the airport two days later, early in the evening, Wufei found Duo already waiting for him, envelope in his hands, carry-on at his feet.

“All booked?” he asked as he drew closer. Duo looked up from the book he was reading and smiled brightly at him.

“Two to Gibraltar,” he confirmed, stuffing the book into his rucksack and zipping it up. He shouldered it and stood, falling into step beside him. “Our appointment’s at 9:00am tomorrow, so we’ve got time to pace it out and grab dinner, check into the hotel and chill tonight… An’ then, the ceremony’s at 11:00am the day after.”

The taller man was a warm presence next to Wufei as they made their way through to the departures lounge, keeping up a steady stream of gentle chatter. Wufei wondered how he managed it, how he was keeping so calm and cheerful.

Since they had decided on this crackpot plan, Wufei had wavered back and forth seemingly every half hour, but Duo had planned everything. Found where they could get married quickest in Europe, managed to get them an appointment and a ceremony, booked the plane tickets and the hotel for them… Wufei hadn’t had to worry about anything. He’d tried, but Duo had headed him off, instead making him catch up on sleep - and tidying the apartment while Wufei napped - and take care of himself. Duo had even called into work to use all the rest of his holiday and whatever TOIL he had saved up from overtime, despite Wufei’s protests that he could handle it.

It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate it - he was bone-achingly grateful, the relief of not being alone for this was almost drowning him. But he was ashamed, too. Ashamed that he hadn’t been able to solve this himself, that he was too weak to get justice for his own daughter himself. And he was ashamed that he was relieved, that he was so willing to grasp this help and take advantage of Duo’s kindness.

Why did he think he was fit to be a father, when he wasn’t even fit to have Duo as his best friend? It wasn’t a question of whether he was fit, he reminded himself harshly, before he could slip too far into despondency. It was a question of whether he was a better option than the people who currently had her.

The answer to that was easy, even with his rock bottom self-esteem.

The gate opened and Wufei stood, picking up Duo’s bag as the other man jogged out of the store with a few bottles of water and some food for the flight, then frowned as he passed it over.

“Why is your bag so heavy? We’re only going for a couple of nights.”

“Brought some light readin’ for the flight,” Duo told him with a grin, unzipping the rucksack and showing it inside. A selection of baby books peered out at Wufei, and once again he was sucker-punched by the thoughtfulness of his partner.
“You don’t need to worry about that,” he protested, whilst Duo shoved the sandwiches and water inside. “She’s my responsibility, you won’t have to-”

“Don’t be dumb,” Duo cut him off, firm hand on his shoulder and steering him onto the plane. “We’re livin’ together, ’course I’ll be helpin’ out. The fuck do you know about babies? We’re in this together, partner. Even if we’re not havin’ a real marriage, we’re still really friends, and friends don’t let friends do dumb shit like look after babies on their own.”

“...What do you know about babies?” Wufei shot back, although it was with a reluctant and half-suppressed grin.

“More’n you. I read two chapters of that book this mornin’. I’m an expert now.”

Once they were seated, Duo gave him another of the books, and they compared notes. Somewhat alarmed, very lengthy notes.

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The registration appointment the previous day had gone smoothly, despite Wufei almost changing his mind at the last minute until Duo talked him around again. For his daughter, he reminded himself. For her.

He was going to have to spend his life making this up to Duo.

His mind was vacillating wildly between hope, anxiety, and sheer total disbelief. Every so often he would be hit with the knowledge - the deep, gut-wrenching knowledge - that he had a child, and his world was turned upside down. He wanted to scream, he wanted to sink through the floor and pull it in behind him. This wasn’t what he had planned, or intended.

He had been quite contented with the prospect of a solitary life, working to keep the peace they fought for, doing good work, real work. A family hadn’t been on the horizon, and he hadn’t felt the lack.

Suddenly he already had a daughter and was a handful of hours off having a husband.

But somewhere under the panic, there was this strange, powerful feeling. Love and protectiveness for this child he had only seen for the shortest of visits, and only had that one photograph to prove it had even happened. This feeling was solid and heavy in him, and everything around it seemed blurry and false.

He was glad Duo was here. And he could crumple under the gratitude for everything he was doing, all the way from this marriage down to the bottle of wine he brought up to their hotel room that evening, keeping him relaxed and trying to make him laugh.

Duo always worked hard to get the people around him smiling and laughing. He never seemed comfortable if everyone wasn’t happy, and he took pains to work out exactly what people needed, then gave it to them.

Particularly Wufei. He supposed he needed the most help.

And perhaps he was too selfish to turn it away, even though he knew he wasn’t capable of
The next day - their wedding day, and fuck but Wufei never thought he’d use those words again about himself - Duo disappeared about half an hour before their ceremony, promising to meet him in there. Wufei wouldn’t have blamed him if he hadn’t. He knew for a fact he was generally difficult - the fact that Duo had remained his friend for so long was honestly beyond scientific explanation, never mind the lengths the other man went to put up with him - but he was also aware that since arriving in Gibraltar he had been cruising at well past ‘unbearable’. Never mind marrying him, Duo should be firing him into the sun and doing the world a favour.

He had been sluggish, snappish, stressed and unresponsive in turns, wound tight and fractious and thoroughly unpleasant to be around. Duo hadn’t seemed phased, instead doing everything he was asked and a great deal more besides.

No, he couldn’t do it, Wufei resolved, stood awkwardly in the room with the Registrar and the two witnesses they had found at the hotel. He couldn’t let Duo tie himself to someone so ridiculous as him, it was too much. He was taking advantage of his kindness and it was too much, far, far too much. As desperately as he wanted this sorted, his daughter with him, this was selfish…

About to turn to the Registrar and explain that actually, maybe it was better to leave it, he was interrupted as music started playing.

“Ah, we’re off,” the Registrar said bracingly, and smiled encouragingly at Wufei.

“What?”

The music was upbeat, peppy, rock-and-roll, and it cruised into the chorus of ‘I knew the bride when she used to rock and roll’ as the doors to the room opened and Duo burst in, a bright grin on his face, a fluffy, glittery veil in his hair, clutching a bouquet of plastic daisies. He danced down the ‘aisle’ of the tiny room, and Wufei didn’t know if it was the fact that the daisies had smiley faces, the glitter on the veil was in the shape of penises, or the choreographed hip thrusts that brought his soon-to-be husband down the aisle, but he cracked.

To the bemusement of the two witnesses and registrar, he broke down into helpless laughter that shook his whole body and made his ribs ache. Tears leaked out of his eyes and he bent down to brace himself on his knees, trying to catch his breath around the laughter. He was vaguely aware of the music stopping and of a warm hand on his back, rubbing soothingly across his shoulders. When he was finally able to turn his head up, he saw Duo standing over him, smiling gently down at him.

“Feelin’ better for that?” he murmured, as Wufei straightened, wiping his face. He nodded mutely in response and leaned into the arm that Duo wrapped around his shoulders. The veil and flowers had been discarded on a chair on the front row, and with them out of sight, the ceremony could continue.

It was a bare bones procedure, done in ten minutes. It felt like it should have been harder, but in next to no time they were walking down the street with their marriage certificate and rings on their fingers.

The rings had been another surprise. Duo whipped them out of his pocket when the Registrar asked before Wufei could even say they didn’t have any. He lifted his hand to inspect it - yellow gold, brushed so it didn’t catch the light. Of course the stealth expert would have thought of that, he thought wryly, rubbing his thumb across it.

“I hope y’don’t mind that it’s yellow,” Duo said, catching him studying it. “I figured you were a
traditionalist. I was gonna get titanium, but the jeweller said that if anythin’ happened we’d lose the fingers before the ring came off. And in our line of work…”

“No, it’s fine. It’s more than fine, I didn’t even think - Just let me know how much I owe you,” he added hastily.

Duo waved him off with a ‘pfft’ noise.

“Consider it a gift,” the American drawled. “I know this ain’t a real marriage by any stretch, but I wanted you to know that this is a real partnership, y’know? I’m in this as long as you are, and I’m gonna help with the kid and pull my weight. So, whenever you start thinkin’ that you’re not doin’ enough, or that you’re ‘trapping’ me, you look down at that and remember that I’m here, alright? I wanna be here, and I’m stayin’ as long as you want me around.”

Wufei opened his mouth to respond, then stopped himself and shook his head, looking to the side as he tried to get his thoughts in order. He couldn’t concentrate properly with that expression on Duo’s face - so trusting, gentle and earnest. It just reminded him what a selfish and unpleasant worm he was.

Duo could clearly see the path his thoughts were heading down, and forcibly redirected him, starting to walk back to the hotel once more.

“Now that’s out the way, we can start preppin’ for the baby. Gettin’ stuff in and ready.”

A to-do list, Wufei could work with that.

*

The list was long. Babies, it seemed, needed a lot of things which Wufei hadn’t been aware of. The crib made sense, but the bassinet until she was 6 months old was a surprise. And the special bath. And the rocker, and carry cot. And the steriliser, and the bottles, and diapers, and toys, changing table…

Standing in the doorway of his tiny apartment, Wufei rubbed at his forehead to try and massage away the headache that was becoming his permanent companion. Even if he got rid of his desk, and got two twin beds in his room, there wasn’t really going to be space for the three of them.

“When is your lease up?” Wufei asked Duo, over the phone, without even saying ‘hello’. He got a sleepy grunt in reply, and then there was a bit of shuffling and rustling which he assumed was Duo rolling over, realising it was only 6:30am and they had only landed from Gibraltar a handful of hours ago, and trying to wake himself up enough to answer.

“Nghhh?” finally came the eloquent response.

“We’re not going to be able to fit in my apartment.” Wufei explained. “And yours is even smaller. We’ll need to start looking for somewhere bigger.”

There was another long pause, another bit of rustling, then a whoosh of breath.

“Gimme ten minutes,” Duo said, and his voice was deep and raspy from sleep. “Wait, no, twenty. Give me twenty minutes. I’ll be right there.”
“No, wait, Duo, we can sort this over the - Duo?”

He had hung up.

Twenty minutes later, as promised, there was a knocking on the front door, and Wufei opened it only to have a bike helmet thrust into his hands.

“What?”

“I’ve got somethin’ to show you,” Duo told him, turning and making his way back towards the stairs. “Bring your wallet, you’re buyin’ me coffee on the way back, husband.”

Wufei stared after him for a second, before leaning back into the apartment to grab his wallet and keys, hastily pulling the door shut behind him and jogging to catch up. He slowed as he drew up beside Duo’s bike, and saw the other man stood looking at it, as if a thought had just occurred to him. The same thought had just occurred to Wufei, as their eyes met and in perfect unison they said,

“We need to get a car.”

*

It took them approximately an hour to get there, winding their way out of Brussels as the buildings thinned and countryside appeared where once there had been houses. Belgian fields rolled pleasingly in all directions. When they passed through a small town, Wufei thought they had arrived, but Duo continued through and out the other side. They continued down a single lane country road, until out of nowhere, Duo turned into a driveway hidden behind a high hedge.

Gravel crunched under the wheels as the bike slowed to a stop, and Duo put his foot down to brace them. The engine cut, and helmets were removed.

“What d’you think?”

The gravel drive curved down in front of a large, grey stone house, an old barn from the style, converted into a home. Some ivy curled up the wall, and lavender was planted in pots on either side of the door, liberally adorned with bumblebees. The hedges at the front hid it from the view of the road, and to the right Wufei could see another separate building stretching down beside the house, perpendicular.

They dismounted, and Duo led the way towards the front door.

“Why are we here?”

“Well… It’s not finished yet, but, if you wanna, we can move in here.”

“What?”

Fishing a key from his pocket, Duo opened the front door and Wufei followed him into the house. The entrance hall was bare, with rough wood floors and plastered walls, leading to a wooden staircase that curved up to the next floor. On either side, doorways led to the other rooms.

“I bought this about two years back,” Duo explained, his voice echoing as he walked through the
space, running his hand over the wall thoughtfully. “Been fixin’ it up on the weekends, or in my
down time. It’s been nice to have a bit of space away from everything, y’know? An’ I wanted to
learn some new tricks.”

“...New tricks?” Wufei asked, picking the door to the left and heading through to explore.

“I can’t keep the Preventers gig up forever, right? I mean, I’m no good at admin, and it’s lookin’
like I might actually get old enough to not be able to keep up on live missions.” It was said with a
wry smile, but Wufei knew what he meant - none of them had thought they would reach the age
where their bodies would become their main handicap to success. “The guys on L2 who used to get
the most work were the ones who had the most skills. They’d line up in the mornin’ for the day
shift, an’ the people would say what they wanted. You had more chance of gettin’ work if you
diversified. So...”

He shrugged, and Wufei studied him thoughtfully, before considering the room they were stood in.
It was a large, kitchen-diner. The kitchen cabinets were a light blue, picked out with cream tiling
and a wood countertop. The room was a large L-shape, with one window onto the drive, and then a
right turn taking them to the longer section that seemed to run the whole width of the house along
the back wall. And there was so much light - large bifolding doors took up a section of wall in the
diner section of the room, looking out across what looked to be a lengthy garden. The kitchen
counter wrapped along the far short wall, and halfway along the back wall, with a window above
the sink looking across the garden as well, and then wrapped around itself again to create a
division between the kitchen and the dining, whilst still giving a clear view and access. The front
part, which looked onto the drive, had polished wood floors, but as they crossed the threshold to
the long part at the back the flooring switched to warm tiles.

“This explains why you still live in that poxy bedsit,” Wufei observed dryly, a little overwhelmed.
Walking towards the windows to see how far the garden extended, he realised this probably came
with at least an acre of land.

“You castin’ aspersions on my executive studio apartment?” Duo drawled, but he did so with a
grin, leaning against the wall and folding his arms. “I just finished the kitchen before I went away,
but the livin’ room still needs doin’, and the bathroom’s only half-finished. But there’s an ensuite
shower room in the master you could use for now, and I could work on gettin’ the main one done
as soon as....”

“I can’t… You’ve already done too much, Duo, I can’t just move into your house.”

“I hadn’t really decided what I was gonna do with it when it was done, to be honest,” Duo said,
scratching his chin. “I wasn’t sure whether I was gonna sell it on, or rent it out for steady income.
But, if the option is movin’ in here with you, or sleeping on that rock solid couch of yours, I know
what my vote is.”

Turning, Duo gestured back out into the hallway and led him up the stairs to the top floor.

“I’ve got a coupla the bedrooms done, I figure those could be for you and the kid, an’ I can work
on mine later, ’cause of that thing where you’ve gotta paint the nursery like three months in
advance for fumes or somethin’? That’s what I read, anyway. But I guess they’re pretty neutral, so
maybe you’d prefer something with more personality for her...”

Pausing outside one of the doors, Duo waved for Wufei to go in ahead of him. The room was at the
end of the corridor, with windows on two walls looking out over fields and the garden. One wall
was painted a soothing pale sage green colour, whilst the others were a warm ivory. The carpet was
thick, with a speckled green pattern running through, a textured mix that complemented the wall.
“This is a beautiful room,” Wufei told him, running his fingers over the treated wood windowsills. It was almost impossible to believe, given his stress a couple of hours ago, that such a place to live would be possible. “It would be perfect. If you’re sure …”

“It makes sense to use it for somethin’ other than a pet project,” Duo said with a shrug and an awkward smile. “There’s a nursery an’ a school in the town as well, and it’s only half an hour on the train from there into the city too, so we wouldn’t be as cut off as we look.”

Staring at his friend, Wufei could only marvel. What had he done in a previous life to deserve someone like Duo? Wufei’s focus had always been on one thing, and doing it well, learning skills as necessary for that rather than widening his gaze. Duo had always seemed to flitter between interests, and now he seemed to have an advantage over Wufei’s rock solid expertise in his job.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone about this place?” he asked, watching Duo lock up and then strolling around the side of the house to look at the garden.

“I wanted to keep it as somewhere to go when… things got too much,” Duo told him, pausing to tug a tuft of moss off the wall of the outbuilding. “Somewhere quiet that was separate from everythin’, where I could focus on doin’ something real and solid, an’ then I could separate myself from stuff a bit.” He shook his head and grinned at Wufei. “But what’s mine is yours now, right? An’ this is a much better use of it.”

A large patio extended from the back of the house - with the doors open it would be like an extension to the dining room - shaded by a wooden pergola, wrapped with climbing roses in full bloom, their colours rich and their scent sweet and heavy in the air. There wasn’t a sound for miles, aside from the calls of birds and the lazy buzzing of insects. The blue sky seemed to stretch as far as the verdant fields around them, and they felt like the only people on earth.

“I was thinkin’ of doin’ somethin’ with the old stables as well,” Duo said, gesturing to the outbuilding. “Wasn’t sure about makin’ it into a guest house or a gym? An’ there’s room to do some work in the attic too, if y’needed more space. But…” He paused, looked around, and let out a contented sigh. “I think this might be an alright place to grow up? The sort of place you used to hear about in stories as a kid, y’know?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Wufei could see the wistful look on the American’s face at the thought of having a childhood in a place like this, and his heart clenched a little. This man had so little all his life, but he was still so free and generous. And he seemed desperate to give Wufei’s daughter everything he’d never had.

She should have been Duo’s daughter, he found himself thinking. If Duo raised her, she would never want for love or affection, and he would know how to express it.

Wufei couldn’t even fully express his thanks for Duo’s help. Self-consciously he ran his thumb over his wedding ring again, and wished, not for the first time, that he was a better man.

“You realise this means we won’t be able to work together any more,” he said suddenly, and the thought made him a little sad.

“Yeah,” Duo said with a sigh. “We can sort that paperwork when everythin’s confirmed. But, hey, it’s not like we won’t see each other plenty!” He patted the wall of the house and grinned. “And you won’t have to bitch at me about my reports any more. You’ll get to bitch at me about chores instead.”

“If you do them right the first time, I won’t have to,”
They stopped at a car dealership on the way back from the house. It wasn’t ideal, Wufei would have preferred to do more research online first, but there was a pressing need to get it done - the sooner they got the car, the sooner they could start moving things over to the house. And get it fitted for a car seat. They’d need to get a van as well, to move their stuff, and transfer the utilities…

“Why do all sensible cars look so lame?” Duo grumbled, kicking moodily at the tyres of a silver station wagon and looking disgusted.

“Because anything not ‘lame’ by your standards doesn’t qualify as sensible,” Wufei told him patiently, peering at the specs of a blue sedan and comparing them to the information he had pulled up on his phone.

“Not true - I liked that four-by-four over there.”

“We don’t need a four-by-four,” Wufei repeated for the umpteenth time since they had arrived. “It’s too big for the roads by the house, and it burns through gas far too quickly to be efficient. Plus it’s not environmentally responsible.”

“Your face isn’t environmentally responsible,” Duo muttered, stuffing his hands into his pockets and slouching past Wufei to look at cars further down the lot. “…Maybe I could just fit a baby seat to the back of my bike?”

Wufei sent him a glare that eloquently detailed his thoughts on that matter, and Duo disappeared with a huff between the rows of vehicles.

Ten minutes later, Wufei found him having popped the hood of a black hatchback, and was bent in half with his head deep inside it, cackling to himself as he used his phone to light up various components.

“What are you doing?” Wufei hissed, coming up behind him. “You’re going to get us in trouble!”

“Why? I just wanna see what I’m buyin’. And, ‘Fei, we should get this one.”

He straightened up and waved Wufei over, pointing excitedly at the engine in front of him. Listening patiently, Wufei noted everything that was being said, and then looked flatly at his companion, who was grinning down at him.

“You want to get it because it’s fast,” he summarised.

“No! Well, not just that, but c’mon, none of the others you’ve looked at have made it past 1.6 litres, this is a 2 litre turbo. Plus it has eco-friendly specs, and the mpg is pretty solid so you can’t even bitch about that. And the safety features are all there.” Duo got down on his hands and knees to shine his torch beneath the car and peer at the underside. “The shocks, exhaust and brakes all look in great shape too. I mean, I’d wanna give it a once-over myself before we got the kid in it, but…”

“But it’s fast,” Wufei repeated, with a wry grin.
Duo rocked back on his heels and grinned back at him.

“It’s really fuckin’ fast,” he agreed.

*

The lawyer and the social worker met them at the house.

Duo and Wufei’s rooms were filled with boxes, but their furniture had been set up in the large kitchen-diner and family room, and all the bits for the baby’s room had arrived, waiting to be assembled. The two women seemed suitably impressed with the location, and with Duo’s manners as he passed the coffee over and took a seat next to Wufei on the sofa opposite them. The item sank as Duo’s weight was added to it - it was the couch from Duo’s bedsit, at least third-hand and well-loved. The visitors sat across from them on Wufei’s sofa, upright and looking a little uncomfortable on the firm cushions.

“Firstly, congratulations on your marriage,” the lawyer said with a smile that almost seemed like she meant it. Perhaps she did, and Wufei was being unfair. “I hadn’t been informed that you were engaged, Mr. Chang.”

“We weren’t, really,” Duo said with an easy smile, draping his arm along the back of the couch and across Wufei’s shoulders, looking extremely casual and at home. “We’ve been partners for years, y’know? An’ hadn’t ever really thought about gettin’ married. But this came up, and it made sense. We eloped!”

All of that was strictly true, Wufei acknowledged, but Duo had somehow made it seem like it meant something totally different. Not a word of a lie had left his lips, and he had said it with such breezy confidence that instead of looking suspicious the two women across from them smiled, and commented on how romantic it was. He even tugged his phone out of his pocket to show them photos - photos - that apparently he had got one of the witnesses to take during the ceremony. Extra proof, alongside the certificate and rings, that they were actually married. He really had thought of everything.

“In light of this, then,” the lawyer said cheerfully, “your claim for full custody for your daughter is approved. We’ll make the arrangements to have her brought down to you in the next week - I’ll file the paperwork as soon as I get back to the office.” She set her mug on the table and turned another page in her notes. “Have you decided on a name, yet?”

“...Liangyu,” Wufei answered, hesitantly. He still wasn’t sure, had spent the days since the wedding pondering names, making lists and changing them. He was happy with this one though, he thought. Why were people given responsibility for naming other people? It was a lot of pressure.

“That’s pretty, family name?”

“No.” Wufei accepted the form and pen being held out to him by the social worker, to fill in his daughter’s name. Chang Liangyu. Born 2nd May, AC 205. Parents – Chang Wufei and Long Meilan. It was surreal, and he felt oddly detached from it all, unable to process that this was actually happening.
“And, just one last thing, will Mr. Maxwell be applying to adopt Liangyu?”

Sat as close together as they were, Wufei felt Duo’s jolt of surprise as if it had been himself who jumped, and he looked up to see the startled expression on the other man’s face.

“Er,” said Duo awkwardly, “we… we hadn’t really thought that far, to be honest…”

The braided man glanced at him, looking a little panicked and apologetic. Seeking support for an answer, he raised his eyebrows and gave a tight, self-deprecating grin.

Considering all that Duo had already done for this child, despite having no blood claim, or having even met her, Wufei was certain that Duo would make an excellent parent. He managed to quirk a smile as he met Duo’s eyes, and inclined his head slightly —

—if you want to, it would be welcome.

The response was another startled look, and then the warmest, most emotional smile he had ever seen on the other man’s face.

Well, that at least would be the right decision.

Forms were passed over, hands shaken, and the two officials were escorted out, with a promise to email the confirmed date of Liangyu’s arrival before close of business that day. Once the door closed behind them, it felt like a vacuum had been left, and the silence seemed hollow in the empty hallway.

Duo stared down at the forms in his hands, flicking through them without really seeming to read them, and looking a little dazed. Wufei padded back through to the kitchen, feeling oddly… light. Like a weight had been lifted. He filled the kettle up and flicked it on, listening to it rumble as it heated. He turned to pull his teapot out, and retrieve his tea caddy, and saw Duo stood in the middle of the dining area, still staring at the forms.

“Everything alright?” he asked eventually. Duo glanced up at him, opened his mouth to answer, then shut it, looking back at the forms. He walked over to the counter to stand opposite Wufei, placing the forms on the counter, and taking a deep breath before meeting his eyes.

“Look, I really ‘ppreciate that, back there, y’know,” he blurted. “But, I think maybe I’d be better not adopting the kid? Don’t get me wrong, I’m… I’m really happy you think it’d be okay for me to do it, it means a lot. But… it’ll make things harder for you when we get divorced, ‘cause then they’ll have have to sort out custody an’ stuff as well. The idea was for you to have an easy out when you found someone you actually wanted to marry. And surely you’d want them to adopt her if anyone…”

Finished carefully spooning the tea into the pot, Wufei closed the caddy with precise movements, thinking carefully about how he wanted to phrase what he was about to say. He felt like he was thinking more clearly than he had in several weeks, it was a novelty.

“I have no intention of leaving this marriage, such as it is, to marry someone else,” he said, as the kettle pinged that it had boiled. He picked it up and poured it into the pot, swilling the leaves as he did so. Duo was watching him carefully, anxiously. “I intend to find a solution to this problem where I can keep Liangyu without being married, but I do not anticipate ever wanting to remarry. This arrangement is no real difficulty for me - aside from losing my partner at work - but you do not deserve to be trapped in this farce with me because I have no inclination to ever remarry.”

“…You never know what could happen,” Duo said, and his voice was a little tight. Wufei placed the lid on the teapot and smiled at him.
“You don’t,” he agreed. “But when you consider how few people I tolerate with any sort of patience, and from amongst them how few I actually care for... it seems rather unlikely that I will find someone new to hold in such high esteem, doesn’t it?” He quirked his eyebrow and got a small grin from Duo. “It’s not fair to keep you trapped here with me because of that, when you are much more capable of finding love. But giving you custody rights over Liangyu…” Wufei paused, turned to retrieve two cups from the cupboard, placing one in front of himself and the second in front of Duo, carefully pouring the tea into the two of them. “In our line of work, it is likely that eventually, one of us may not come home. Should something happen to me, Liangyu will be back with my clan, which defeats the purpose of this exercise in the first place. If you adopt her, then she would go to your custody, and you could protect her.” He raised the hot mug to his lips and inhaled the steam, enjoying the aroma. Across the counter, Duo ran his finger around the rim of the mug and looked thoughtful. “After all you’ve done for me - for us - I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have raising her.”

Another startled expression flashed across Duo’s face, and he coloured a little, embarrassed.

“I don’t like thinkin’ about you dyin’,” he muttered, picking up his own mug. “Feels like we should be past that now.”

“I can’t say I’m fond of it either,” Wufei drawled. “But I suppose that’s something we have to think about. Now we’re parents.”

“Parents,” Duo breathed, awestruck, and looked down at the forms in front of him again. “Yeah, I guess we are.”

* * *

She was so tiny.

Duo had never seen a human being so tiny in all his life. Her little hand couldn’t even wrap around his smallest finger. Even now, she was clinging to it tightly, eyes closed and seemingly asleep in her car seat on the kitchen counter.

Wufei stood beside him, staring down at his daughter - their daughter - with an expression of bewildered pride. He was less surprised by her tininess, but Duo supposed he had seen her before, had some concept of how little she was. She was so little. And entirely theirs to care for.

She had a shock of fluffy black hair, and a little snub nose. Her eyes, what Duo had seen of them when she had blinked sleepily up at them before dozing off again, were as beautiful and dark as her father’s. And her skin was so soft, all new and pudgy.

She even had tiny fingernails. That shouldn’t have surprised him, but it did somehow. He hadn’t ever thought about baby fingernails, hadn’t ever considered how miniscule they’d be. Tiny. Teeny tiny.

“What do you think?” Wufei’s voice was an undertone, filled with awe and shock.

“She’s perfect,” Duo breathed back, unable to take his eyes off her. “How d’you make something so perfect?”

“I don’t know,” Wufei said, sounding dazed. “It must be from her mother’s side. It’s certainly not...”
“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Duo said, and got a gentle elbow in his side in response.

Shooting a sideways grin at Wufei, he got an answering smile back, before they both found their gazes drawn back to Liangyu. Their daughter.

“Well,” Duo said. “Here goes nothin’.”

*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to kangofu_cb for betaing this so quickly!

- you can get married in Gibraltar within twenty four hours. You have to meet with the registrar on the morning of one day, and then can get married the next, with simply proof of one night's stay in the country. However, it's a 6 hour flight from Brussels to Gibraltar, so the boys went for two nights. Of course this may not be the case in the future, with Spain wanting to take Gibraltar back from British control in the wake of Brexit. Spanish Marriage Law is notoriously complicated, so people often cross the border to get married in Gibraltar. Gibraltar is quite happy as they are, and are a bit miffed they're being used as a negotiation tactic in this silly political bickering, with no-one asking what they wanted.

- Liangyu is named after Qin Liangyu, an ancient Chinese scholar and warrior. You can read more about her here: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qin_Liangyu

I think she is someone Meilan would have admired.
Une was not terribly surprised to find Sally camped out in Heero and Trowa’s office when she stopped by on her return to Brussels after six weeks on L1. Sally had the good grace to look a little guilty about it, as she rummaged through Trowa’s stationary drawer looking for post-it notes to steal.

“Still hiding from Carter?” she asked wryly.

“I’m going to beat him to death with my stapler if I spend any longer with him,” Sally admitted, from her position squeezed beside Trowa behind his desk, garnering an amused snort from the other two agents in the room. “He told me last week that the Bible was proof of alien sightings in Roman times.”

“Oh well,” Une soothed, “it’s not for much longer.”

“What?”

“I’ve come to put in for the card,” Une said breezily, ignoring the puzzled look on Sally’s face and waving her purse as if that explained everything. “Do you have it? Or have I missed it?”

She was greeted with a room full of blank expressions and a long silence. Trowa glanced at Heero, who shrugged; Sally looked at Trowa and got a mystified head shake in response, before all three turned bemused faces to Une.

“For Chang and Maxwell?” she prompted, eyebrows raised. “For their wedding?”

Trowa choked on his mouthful of coffee, and the biro Heero was using snapped with a plastic ‘crunch’, and a hasty scramble to mop up the sudden spill of blue ink. The expressions that Une was looking at went from mystified to bamboozled, and she had distinct impression of a bowl of ornamental goldfish goggling at her. It felt like even Heero’s chilli plant was gawping from its spot on the windowsill, although that may have been due to the pair of large googly-eye stickers that adorned the pot, courtesy of Duo Maxwell.

“What wedding?” Trowa croaked weakly, voice a little raspy from unexpected coffee inhalation.

“Chang and Maxwell’s wedding? I’ll admit I was impressed that they had managed to keep their relationship so quiet, even if it wasn’t strictly in line with regulations, but now it’s on paper we’re able to sort that – did you not wonder why you were getting reassigned to partner Chang?” Une demanded of Sally, becoming frustrated with the lack of comprehension. She had come into work this morning to a nice tidy pile of paperwork for her attention, and whilst she admitted to being a little surprised, she wished them well and had been pleased they had shown such attention to the administrative details. It made her life a lot easier.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it!” Sally spluttered.

“Surely you expected it, given their marriage?” Une pressed, impatiently. “Didn’t Chang tell you he’d requested it?”

“This is the first we’ve heard of that!” Trowa protested. “No-one’s seen or heard from them for
weeks, aside from a brief text from Duo saying ‘Chang fine, extending holiday, ttyl’.”

“Oh.” Une deflated a little. “I suppose they eloped, then. That explains why the marriage certificate is from Gibraltar.”

“They’re really married?” Heero insisted, giving up trying to get the ink stains off his fingers, and tossing the crumpled tissue into his waste paper basket. “Are you certain it’s not some stupid prank?”

“No, the certificate is perfectly real. Although I did think it was odd that none of you were selected for witnesses…” She frowned thoughtfully, then shook her head and straightened again. “Well, I can sign the card and put in the collection for the baby at least.”

This time Trowa’s carry-out cup was the victim of a startled spasm, covering his desk, shirt, and Sally with a generous shower of just-about-hot coffee.

“What baby ?!”

*

Une had been a little startled by the vehemence of their outburst following the revelation of the baby, and insistence on details. She became mulelish, and drew herself to her full height, letting a generous amount of frost coat her words as she told them that there was such a thing as Employee Privacy. All she would acknowledge was that Chang had put in for paternity leave beginning immediately, and she had a reference request from social services to support the adoption application of Duo Maxwell.

The details of Une’s visit were circulated very quickly between the group of ex-pilots and their close contacts, interspersed with increasingly rude texts and emails to Wufei and Duo demanding information. Quatre had heard nothing, nor had Hilde (although Hilde had several choice words to say on the matter). Howard was none-the-wiser, but seemed unconcerned, laughing that no, Duo hadn’t mentioned anything while he’d been there, but that was Maxwell all over – impulsive and unpredictable.

Relena called them before they had managed to dial more than half her number, and demanded to know why she had been sent a request for an adoption reference, and why hadn’t anyone kept her in the loop with the gossip. The idea that she had been excluded from such juicy information seemed to bother her far more than the news that Duo and Wufei were now apparently married and aiming to co-parent a defenceless child of mysterious origin. Once she had been assured that they had only just found out themselves, she was able to become properly engaged with the rest of the situation.

After work that day, Sally piled into Trowa’s car and followed Heero over to Duo’s apartment to demand some clarity. When no answer was forthcoming, they took it upon themselves to gain entry using other resources, only to find the tiny bedsit completely empty. Not only was Duo conspicuously absent, but so was all his furniture. The room somehow seemed smaller for being empty and clean, and they stood there, perplexed and basking in the smell of furniture polish and carpet freshener.

The next stop took them to Wufei’s address, and they were met with an identical lack of answer,
and then an identical empty apartment.
They were not terribly happy about this.

* 

“Oh dear, Heero, who taught you those words?” Duo chuckled, as he listened to the sixth voicemail in a queue of twelve.

“You did,” Wufei said dryly.

Duo was lounging on his squishy sofa, and, after having done dramatic readings of all the texts and emails he had received in the last two days, was finally going through his voicemail messages. Across from him, Wufei was sat comfortably in a rocking chair Duo had found in the antiques store in town. He was rocking gently, looking totally at peace as he fed Liangyu. The baby was nestled in his arms, eyes fixed firmly on him, her little hands grasping at the air as she ate.

Watching them, Duo felt like he had to hold his breath to avoid contaminating such a perfect scene with his own issues. He was only shocked into breathing again when Wufei finally looked up and quirked an eyebrow at him, smirking, and Jesus he was breathless in a totally different way.

“I didn’t teach him those ones,” he managed to retort flippantly, deleting the message and moving onto the next one. “I blame Trowa.”

He got through two more messages before Wufei set the bottle aside and wiped Liangyu’s mouth carefully with the muslin over his shoulder, sitting her up on his lap and rubbing her back until she let out a loud belch.

“Atta girl,” Duo said proudly.

“They certainly seem much more angry at you than at me,” Wufei commented, standing with Liangyu and handing her to Duo as he moved past the with empty bottle to the kitchen.

Hands around her stomach, and more than easily encircling her, Duo sat Liangyu on his chest and pulled faces at her. She blinked down at him, and flapped her arms experimentally, smacking her palms against his thumbs. Duo knew exactly why people seemed more angry at him.

“I suppose they think I’ve compromised your virtue,” Duo mused, his voice light and playful. “I’m the cad after all, isn’t that right Lia?”

“Liangyu,” Wufei corrected, head deep in the dishwasher.

“I have brought Daddy down to my shameful level,” Duo told the baby, bouncing her slightly and smiling broadly. “He is wallowin’ in the gutter with me, I have besmirched his good name. She’s smiling at me!”

“It’s gas,” Wufei told him, straightening up and turning the dishwasher on, starting to wipe the sides down. “She’s too young to smile properly yet.”

“The book said she could start doing it from six weeks.”

“Maybe we should invite them over,” Wufei suggested, moving back to sit on the sofa across from
“Why would we do that?” Duo asked. Liangyu was reaching forwards and he let her lean, let her hands start exploring his face as she made little curious noises. Her expression was grave, concentration evident as her fingers grabbed at his mouth and chin.

“They’re clearly concerned, and perhaps we should explain things to them. Now that everything’s… settled.”

Wrapping his lips over his teeth, Duo nibbled playfully at Liangyu’s hands, even as he let out a sigh through his nose. Letting the others come here would mean an end to the bliss that had settled since Liangyu’s arrival. Yes, okay, neither of them had slept terribly much - the poor kid was placid enough, but moving to Earth had thrown the routine she had only barely begun to form. She was starting to settle, though, and a real weight seemed to have been lifted from Wufei.

Out of the corner of his eye, Duo could see him sat with a mug of tea in one hand, and his tablet in the other. The tension that had always seemed present had gone, even the background stuff that had been unrelated to the baby stress, the tension that kept a slight furrow never far from between his eyebrows, the way that he had clenched his jaw even when he wasn’t really thinking about it.

Duo had no doubt he was a tooth-grinder in his sleep.

But now? He was relaxed. The set of his shoulders and the curve of his neck showed absolute peace, and his face was smooth and serene. It was like all the day-to-day worries of his life had vanished once his daughter had arrived. And somewhere in his deep heart, Duo clung to the happiness that he had helped make this happen. Seeing Wufei like this was possible because of him. No matter how the rest of this turned out, that was something he could keep forever.

He was even still wearing his wedding ring. Duo had noticed that. Couldn’t help but notice it. Was desperately trying not to read more into it than he should have done, even as he followed the lead and wore his own.

As if he could sense his thoughts somehow, Wufei absently rubbed his thumb over his ring - a new habit he was starting to develop - and looked up. He smiled when he saw Duo looking at him, and it widened when he took in the sight of Liangyu lying on her stomach on Duo’s chest, fast asleep and snoring gently.

Duo could die right there, right then, looking at that expression, and be happy.

Letting the others in was going to burst this delirious little bubble he seemed to be living in at the moment. It wasn’t that he expected it to last forever - nothing good in Duo’s life lasted forever - but he wanted to eke as much bliss out of this as he could before it ended. Take as much time as he could to absorb that look from Wufei, the feeling of the tiny, warm life comfortably trusting on his chest. He knew he’d never get this twice, so he just wanted a little bit longer. Just a little.

He surely could ask for that much at least?

*

The cars all drew into the drive at the same time. Duo watched them through the window, trying to suppress the sense of dread that was trying to claw its way up his spine. Dinner with friends had
never felt so much like the onset of doom. And the fact that all the cars arrived at the same time? That spoke of coordination - he half-expected to see them walking to the front door with an ‘intervention’ banner.

Behind him, he could hear Wufei moving around the two dining tables they’d shoved together, making sure the cutlery was set out, glasses on each place. Liangyu was in a bouncer seat on the kitchen counter, chewing on her hand as she watched her father work, bright eyes following his every move curiously. Behind her, the dinner was keeping warm in the oven, and wine was breathing in a decanter. Dessert was chilling in the fridge, and Duo knew for a fact there was cheese, chutney, and crackers for after that.

“You seem tense,” Wufei commented calmly, rearranging a napkin.

“I’ve never given a dinner party,” Duo said. “I’m not the sorta person that usually gives dinner parties. You’re the sorta person that gives dinner parties. I’m the sorta person that buys in a few beers and sticks a dumb movie on the TV. This is all… refined an’ shit.”

“You manage to make that sound like a bad thing,” Wufei said dryly.

“It ain’t a bad thing,” Duo muttered. “It just ain't my thing.”

“Go let them in. They’re our friends, not an invading army.”

Grunting a response, Duo shoved his hands into his pockets and slouched through to the entrance hall. He managed to plaster a smile on his face and open the door before anyone had managed to knock on it, but the smile became a rictus when he saw who was at the front of the group.

“Hello, Duo,” Hilde said, her tone bright but her eyes like two steel gimlets boring right into his soul. “How are things?”

Shit. He hadn’t thought she’d be able to make it. He’d been banking on the fact that she wouldn’t have been able to get down to Earth on such short notice.

He was in trouble with Hilde here. And the fact that she was here meant she was really pissed at him. Shit. He was doubly in trouble.

Managing somehow to maintain his composure, he was able to stand aside and wave them through to where Wufei was waiting, and his execution was stayed for a while longer as Liangyu, in her stripey jammies, stole the show.

At first there was a moment of stunned silence as everyone filed into the room and saw that, yes, Wufei was holding a baby. A baby which looked uncannily like him, particularly as she fixed everyone with a piercing frown, wobbling as she was in Wufei’s grip, trying to push herself away from his chest to see further.

Shuffling in behind them, Duo was able to find at least some amusement in watching the group try to organise their thoughts, taking in the baby, the wedding ring, the room around them, and the framed photo from the wedding ceremony that Duo had printed as a half-joke and stuck on the mantle. They had marched in powered by righteous fury that Duo had done Something, or that this was some kind of perverse joke, but now they were in this room the wind had been taken from their sails. They’d expected a farce, and they’d found something precious and wonderful instead, and they didn’t know what to do.

Wufei broke the silence in the end.
“This is Liangyu,” he said, looking down at the baby. “My daughter. Soon to be Duo’s as well, paperwork pending.”

The reactions were mixed. Quatre relaxed and smiled, Heero pressed his hand over his mouth, whilst Trowa’s hands smoothed back his hair before resting firmly on his head. Relena looked like she was about to cry and Hilde… Hilde was looking at Duo, looking like she was going to remove some of his vital organs before dessert.

It was Sally who spoke first. She fished in her handbag and removed a package, placing it on the coffee table with a rustle.

“Call me when she needs these,” she said.

“...That’s rather forward thinking,” Wufei said, looking at the pack of sanitary towels. “But thank you. I appreciate that.”

It was difficult to remain awkward after that, and Relena rushed forwards to relieve Wufei of the baby, whisking her off to the window to be cooed and fussed over, whilst Quatre shook Wufei’s hand firmly. Duo guided Heero and Trowa to the kitchen area to distribute drinks, keeping them firmly between him and Hilde.

It was going to be a long evening.

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Liangyu had made it clear that she had had quite enough of all this nonsense about half an hour after everyone arrived. Overtired and overstimulated, she yowled her displeasure until Duo was able to dart in and retrieve her from Sally. Much to the surprise of everyone except Wufei, she quieted almost instantly, still grizzling but starting to settle.

He shot them an awkward grin, and disappeared to set her down to sleep. If he was honest, he took longer than he really needed to, putting her down in the bassinet at the end of Wufei’s bed, setting the mobile playing gentle music, and then crouching beside it to peer in at her. Her little feet kicked slightly as she lay, watching the soft lights and moving shapes above her, and her breathing evened out, eyelids drooping.

“Ah, kid,” he murmured to her, “it’s been good knowin’ you. But if Hil doesn’t murder me before tonight’s through, I reckon Heero and Tro will step up to bat for her.”

He ran a finger gently over her cheek, prompting a slight, sleepy grunt in response. Straightening, he flicked the baby monitor on, and headed back down the stairs, ready for the judgement he knew was coming. He paused outside the door to get his game face back on, and could hear Wufei talking. Evidently the explanation had been demanded as soon as Duo had left the room.

“Isn’t this a bit… legally dubious?” Relena was asking.

“Why?” Wufei replied, calmly.

“It’s a fake marriage!”

“It’s a perfectly real marriage,” Wufei told her, and his tone was so firm but unconcerned that Duo
almost believed him too.

“But you don’t love each other,” she protested.

“There’s no legal requirement for romantic love in marriage,” he pointed out. “There certainly wasn’t any such thing in my last one. Marriage has been used for political and personal reasons for centuries. When Meilan and I married, it was at the behest of our elders to protect their clan interests. We didn’t even like each other. My marriage to Duo is no different from that, but in many ways it’s a significant improvement - I have a partner I not only respect, but I get on with, and with whom I enjoy spending time. That’s more than a lot of people can ask for.”

Well, that was nice of him to say, Duo thought, even as it twisted his heart a little. He leaned back against the doorframe and let out a quiet sigh. He knew what this was, he himself had gone to great pains to assure Wufei that was all it was. It still hurt to hear it declared in such a matter-of-fact way.

“And if either of you falls in love with someone else?” Quatre asked, incisive as ever with his questions.

“I’m working to find a way to keep custody of Liangyu when Duo and I divorce. The adoption should go some way to help with that - it removes her further from the clan’s grasp. I don’t anticipate this being forever, and I’ll do my best to make sure that this doesn’t get in the way of Duo finding happiness.”

There was a long silence in the room. If he strained his ears slightly, Duo could hear people shifting in their seats, and he could perfectly picture the awkward looks their friends were sharing. He felt bad he had left Wufei to handle this on his own, but at the same time he had a feeling that it would have been handled significantly less delicately by the others if he had been in there.

“...And what about you?” Trowa asked, and Duo wondered if he knew he was listening, knowing exactly how to get under his skin.

“Pardon?”

“What if you meet someone else?”

And there it was. The million-dollar question. The possibility that Duo knew would come one day, but which he couldn’t really bear to think about, even as much as he hoped Wufei would find someone and be happy. He found himself holding his breath, waiting for the answer as eagerly as the others.

“I think,” Wufei said slowly, “that there are people in this world who are capable of falling in love, and of inspiring love in return. Duo is one of those people. But… I’m not. And I am perfectly content with that. I anticipated a life alone, with a job I could be proud of. I was honoured to have friends and colleagues I respected and valued. That was enough. And… now I have Liangyu. She was unexpected, but whatever the circumstances, I am glad she is here. I’m astonished every day by how precious she’s become to me. That is something I never thought I would get, and never thought to regret it. I’m satisfied with that. More than satisfied. Romantic love is not something I will ever find, but it is also not something I am lacking. I feel no loss knowing I will be alone.”

There was another long silence, a rustle of clothes.

“Oh Wufei, that’s so sad,” Relena said, finally, and it sounded like it had almost been wrenched from her heart to say it.
“Is it? I think I’m remarkably blessed.”

Privately, Duo had to agree with Relena, no matter how well Wufei phrased it, and how often Duo liked to tease Relena for her more romantic tendencies. But the idea of Wufei alone for the rest of his life broke his heart.

He pushed gently away from the doorframe, and crept his way back up to the landing silent as a shadow. At the top, he turned, and then thudded back down the stairs more heavily than usual, letting his feet fall heavily on the floor before he passed through the door.

“Madam’s down, grub up?” he said cheerfully, breezing in as if just arrived from the floor above. The others looked at him awkwardly from where they had assumed places around the table, but Wufei just nodded to acknowledge him.

“That took a while. Was everything okay?”

“A bit overtired and overgrouchy.” Duo waved it off, plonking himself in the only empty seat as casually as possible - which took some concentration, as circumstances (and his friends) appeared to have conspired to ensure he was sat between Hilde and Heero.

His appetite was suddenly rather difficult to find.

*

Dinner passed filled with polite, pleasant, and inconsequential conversation. Everyone seemed on their best behaviour, but the longer Duo spent sat next to Hilde, the more tense he became. He couldn’t have told you what had been on the menu by the end of the meal, because he hadn’t been able to really taste a bite of it.

Relena and Sally volunteered to clear the table, and suddenly there was a sharp grip on his elbow.

“Come on, Duo,” Hilde purred. “Give me a tour of your new place.”

He stood. There was nothing he could do to get out of it, and Heero and Trowa stood as well, falling in beside them. Wufei looked like he might join them, but before he could get out of his seat, Quatre grabbed his attention with a question about the progress of the L5 regenerations, and Duo knew his doom was sealed.

Heavy-footed, he led them up the stairs, and Hilde nearly dragged him to the room at the end of the landing until he resisted.

“I’ll do this on the landing if you want, Maxwell,” she growled.

“Not in there,” he hissed back. “That’s Wufei’s room - where the baby is.”

He shook his arm out of her grip and led the way with a resigned sigh to the room that was due to become the nursery on the other end of the corridor. Standing aside, he waved them through the door, and followed behind them, closing it quietly behind them.

Turning to face the three of them, he leaned back against it and folded his arms, sticking his chin out mulishly. They formed a loose triangle, Hilde at the front, with Heero and Trowa flanking her
on either side. The two men looked studiously blank-faced. Hilde looked flaming pissed.

“Let’s get this over with, then,” he said.

“Oh no, you don’t get to say that shit,” Hilde snarled, poking him in the chest. For a person who barely came up to his chin, she had no fear in meeting him eye-to-eye. “You don’t get to act like this is something we’re putting you through. What the fuck - what the fuck?” she demanded, furious.

He didn’t say anything, watching instead as she wound herself up further.

“I’ve spent every day since I found out about this whole stupid scheme trying to decide what was worse,” she snapped, gesturing wildly. “The fact that you’ve put yourself in this stupid-ass situation where you end up torturing yourself by getting fake-married to a guy who doesn’t love you; or the fact that you’ve manipulated this situation to play house and happy families with someone who has no idea how you feel about him!”

“I didn’t manipulate-”

“You suggested it!” She poked him again, nails sharp even through his shirt. “Wufei told us that you volunteered. He thought it was very noble of you, because he’s got no idea this is some perverse way for you to live out your fantasies! You’ve co-opted his life to get what you want, you underhanded son of a bitch, and that is sick-”

“I did not!” Duo growled back. “He needed - if I hadn’t done this, he wouldn’t have got his daughter! He’d have had to leave her in the custody of - of those fuckin’ monsters who wanted to drop a fuckin’ colony on the planet! And who didn’t think it was out of line to use a dead woman’s eggs and a teenager’s sperm to make a baby in a lab!”

Hilde rocked back on her heels to glare at him through her fringe.

“Yes, that’s what motivated you,” she sneered. “You were concerned about the welfare of a baby you’d never met, and the morals of her guardians.”

“And he would have left,” he hissed. “Is that what you wanted to hear? I did it because I couldn’t deal with him movin’ back to L5. Because for her, he would’ve done, and I’d’ve lost him.”

“You don’t have him!” Hilde wailed, waving her arms at him, as if trying to flag him down to planet Earth. “This isn’t real! You’re kidding yourself!”

“Will you keep it down, he’ll hear you!”

“Oh no,” she gasped theatrically. “What a shame if he should hear me! It’s not like your husband should have a right to know that you’re secretly in love with him!”

Duo groaned and rubbed his hands over his face, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes. Over Hilde’s shoulders, Heero and Trowa were watching with their arms folded. Clearly they felt that the tiny dynamo of rage in front of them was adequately raising all the issues they had with the situation, although he had no doubt they would weigh in if they felt she’d missed anything.

“And where should we start with that?” Hilde continued viciously, going straight for the jugular. “This man, who you love so much that you bought a house in a fucking field so you could come out here to get some space and peace of mind from? Who drives you to such distraction that twice a year you go work yourself into a coma with me, or Howard, so you can have a couple of weeks without dreaming of him? All your friends have been telling you to maybe keep some space
between you, for your own sake, so you fucking move in with him and adopt his kid!?”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Fucking am I?” she demanded, shoving at his shoulder. “He’s out there telling everyone what a great friend you are, and he’s still wearing his wedding ring! Do you think he’d be doing that if he knew the truth? You’re so full of shit, Duo Maxwell, you’re lying to him through your damn teeth.”

“...I never told him I wasn’t in love with him?” he offered, weakly. He got another solid punch in the shoulder for that, but he knew he definitely deserved that one.

She shoved him out of the way of the door and ripped it open, marching towards the stairs. Duo’s heart leapt into his throat.

“Hilde!” he hissed after her. “Don’t! Please - don’t!”

Hand on the bannister, she turned to look at him as he stared at her, wide-eyed and pleading. Her glower was white hot, and for a long moment he thought she was just going to ignore him, to turn and go.

“I won’t say anything tonight,” she said, her voice low and dark, “but I swear to God, if you haven’t told him by the next time I see you, I’ll rip your nutsack off, and that little girl will have a Mommy and a Daddy, instead of two Daddies.”

With that she stomped down the stairs, leaving him sagged against the doorframe, heart rate through the roof. He turned to look at his other two friends behind him, and got a grunt from Heero and a shrug from Trowa.

“What she said,” Trowa added simply, and then the two of them brushed past him and followed Hilde down the stairs, leaving Duo alone to try and get his adrenaline levels down from the roof.

*

After taking the others on the tour of the house, Duo had seemed a little jittery, coming back into the kitchen and cracking open a beer, taking several long pulls in silence before he went to join any of the conversations. Wufei watched him out of the corner of his eye for a while, but eventually he seemed to settle, to relax and find the rhythm of the evening again.

Hilde seemed calmer too - the tension radiating off her had been almost palpable since she’d arrived, Wufei had noticed it. He found himself wondering if this marriage of convenience had already caused some damage to Duo’s love life, and the guilt cut right through him.

So, when Duo pushed open the doors and led the others out to relax on the patio and admire summer evening view across the fields, Wufei caught Quatre’s arm, and asked for a private word. The blonde agreed, and followed as Wufei scooped up the baby monitor and padded out into the hallway and across to the other front room, which had become a temporary study of sorts, holding his desk and bookcases, and files full of paperwork relating to Liangyu.

“I was wondering,” he began, shutting the door behind the two of them, “if I could impose on your resources for some help.”
The smile Quatre turned on him was painfully kind and understanding. His whole stance was open and unassuming, hands loosely in his pockets, shoulders relaxed, and head tilted a little to the side.

“My resources are always available to any of you,” Quatre said. “You should know that by now.”

Inclining his head, Wufei moved past him and carefully set the monitor on his desk, taking a moment to straighten the files on there. He could feel Quatre’s gaze on him, patient and undemanding.

“Now that I have custody of Liangyu, I need to ensure I keep it, no matter what happens with my marital affairs,” he said slowly. “I was… unwilling to get anyone involved before I gained custody, because I could not bear the idea of facing everyone’s pity were I unsuccessful.”

“I understand,” Quatre said. “If you can send copies of the paperwork to me, I’ll get my lawyers to look through it.”

“There’s also the issue of the… samples they are storing.”

“I think it should be easy enough to regain your sample,” Quatre agreed. “However, your wife’s may be more difficult, depending who is legally designated her next of kin.”

“I appreciate any support you can give,” Wufei told him, bending in a grateful bow.

Quatre huffed out an amused breath, and strolled over to the window to peer out at the drive. As usual, he looked thoroughly at home - Quatre rarely looked discomforted in a new environment. He didn't blend like Trowa, but he had this way of claiming the space around him and making himself comfortable.

It probably had something to do with the fact that he could buy and sell any place many times over, Wufei thought wryly. That seemed like the sort of thing that would put anyone at ease.

If he had had the inclination, he could have returned to L5 and had similarly lofty prospects. The thought didn't come with any regret, he had never felt a desire for much in the way of material things, although he recognised that money made things somewhat easier, life was not impossible without it.

But then, Wufei supposed, studying his friend's back, for all he would have been a leader, he wouldn't have been in control in the way Quatre was. A company was a living, changing beast, able to be steered under the right navigator. He knew his clan well enough to know the same would not be true for them.

The other man turned to face him again, and this time his smile was thoughtful, appraising.

“You're wrong, you know,” he said, breaking the silence.

“Pardon?”

“What you said earlier, about not being the sort of person to inspire love,” Quatre clarified, stepping closer again. “You're wrong.”

“Don't imagine that I said that out of any inferiority complex that you need to soothe,” Wufei retorted, folding his arms and tilting his chin up, bracing himself for the argument. “It was merely a statement of fact, I am perfectly happy.”

“Don't imagine I’m trying to soothe you,” Quatre chuckled, refusing to rise to the bait. “I'm glad
you're happy, but that's only a statement of facts as you perceive them. The truth is - you are capable of inspiring love, and you have the potential to be even happier.

“Oh, yes? And precisely what kind of person would I -” He gestured at himself, encompassing his entire difficult nature and significant baggage in one handwave. “- inspire to love me?”

“Duo.”

“...What?”

“You’ve heard of the four types of love?” Quatre asked blithely, strolling over to the bookcase and running his fingers idly across the spines of the volumes that had been unpacked so far. “As put forward in Ancient Greece?”

“Yes…” Wufei said, unsure how this non sequitur was related. “Agape, eros, philia, and storge. Unconditional, erotic, friendship, and familial love.”

“That's a rough summary yes, but they're more complex than that. They’re not distinct categories. They can interlink and change.” Quatre tilted one of the books out of the shelf and flicked through it idly. “You will feel agape towards Liangyu, but also storge. Duo is your friend, but he's now also part of your family.”

“Your point?” Wufei demanded, impatient.

“My point,” Quatre said, closing the book with a ‘snap’ and turning to face Wufei again, “is that before you write off a world full of strangers as unsuitable partners, you should look at the relationships you already have, and consider how much they’ve changed. And how much further they could change in the future.”

He handed the book to Wufei with a bright smile, and then wandered out of the study to rejoin the others. Wufei looked down at the book, a dictionary, and saw that a page had been marked. Opening it, at the top of the page, was the definition of 'storge'.

* 

Everyone had left hours ago, but Wufei was lying awake, listening to Liangyu’s quiet snores from the foot of his bed and frowning at the dark ceiling, trying to unpick Quatre’s words earlier.

Did Quatre think he was in love with Duo? Or that he should be in love with Duo? Or that he should make Duo fall in love with him? That final thought was not only an absurd suggestion, but honestly impossible - you couldn’t just make someone fall in love with you, and even were it possible, Wufei would be remarkably under qualified. Besides, why would he want to make Duo fall in love with him?

It wasn’t like he was in love with Duo after all. And after everything Duo had already done for him, it seemed the ultimate in spite to try and trap him forever in this relationship when he could go and have the life he had planned for himself.

Irritated, he rolled out of bed and padded downstairs to make himself some tea, and then shut himself in the study, unpacking some more of the boxes of books in there to try and calm his mind.
The blasted dictionary was still on his desk, and he shoved it back on the shelf with more force than was strictly necessary. Quatre was thoroughly ridiculous. Wufei was happy, and would be happy still once he and Duo divorced, and his friend was living the live he deserved. His friend. His best friend. Nothing more.

Well, his husband at this stage, but that was rather more academic than anything else. It was a marriage on paper - Duo had been very clear that was all he wanted, and Wufei would respect that. Had no intention of not respecting that - he had not even thought it would come into question at all until his conversation with Quatre this evening. A relationship with Duo wasn’t going to happen.

Oh this was ridiculous, he was thinking himself in circles around a subject that didn’t deserve even a fraction of the brainpower he had expanded on it this evening.

Still annoyed, he resolved to stop considering the matter entirely, and flicked off the light. His feelings for Duo Maxwell were as deep as they were ever going to get, and that was plenty deep enough.

He stepped out of the study, and paused when he saw a dim light across the hall in the living room. Cautiously, he moved across and quietly pushed open the door to see Duo curled up on the sofa giving Liangyu a bottle. He was wearing only his pj pants, and the baby was cradled against his warm chest in the lamplight, and he was looking down at her with the most gentle and awestruck expression.

Startled by how much the sight struck him, Wufei sucked in a breath, and his friend glanced up, smiling at him.

“Hey,” the other man murmured.

“Did she cry?” Wufei asked. “I didn’t hear her.”

“Nah,” Duo assured him, voice low and soothing. “I got up to go to the bathroom, and she was startin’ to make noises, so I thought I’d grab her before she could really wake up.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

Duo hummed a gentle acknowledgement, looking back down at the baby.

“I was thinkin’,” he said, “that maybe it might be worth gettin’ a second bassinet for my room? That way I’m not sneakin’ into your room if she starts crying in the night, or takin’ on more feeds than you ought.” He glanced up again. “Can split the duties that way?”

“I - yes, that sounds sensible,” Wufei said slowly. “Although… wouldn’t that mean putting off decorating your room for a while?”

“It’s not in too bad a state now,” Duo said, shrugging a shoulder. “It can stay like that for a while, for the sake of Lia.”

“Liangyu,” Wufei corrected, suddenly and irrationally annoyed. “Her name is Liangyu.”

Slightly startled, Duo looked at him again, and Wufei suddenly felt guilty for the flash of surprised hurt across the other man’s face, and then annoyed again for feeling guilty. This wasn’t how things were supposed to be, it wasn’t meant to be Duo sacrificing things for the sake of Wufei’s child. He shouldn’t be so open to Wufei taking advantage of him, he shouldn’t just be allowing this.

“Is she finished?” he asked.
“Er, yeah,” Duo said, hesitantly, taking the bottle away from her.

“I’ll take her, you should go back to bed.”

Clearly confused, and a little reluctant, Duo stood and passed Liangyu over to Wufei, pausing to drape the muslin cloth over his shoulder so she could be winded.

“I’ll… see you in the mornin’, I guess,” Duo muttered, and, with a backwards glance, padded his way out of the room and back up the stairs.

Letting out an irritated sigh, he bounced Liangyu gently in his grip as he rubbed at her back until the expected burp appeared. She fidgeted her head against his shoulder and made a disgruntled noise.

“Oh, I know, I know,” he muttered. “I shouldn’t let myself be unbalanced like this. And I shouldn’t take my failings out on Duo.”

His daughter didn’t respond, not that he had really expected her to. He sighed again and turned off the lamp, moving up to bed himself.

He would apologise in the morning.

*

The apology almost went well. At least, the attempt at the apology almost went well, but Duo kept waving him off and saying it was fine and it made sense, there’d been a lot going on, so it was natural to get a bit crabby.

“You don’t need to make excuses for me,” Wufei snapped. “I’m an adult, and I can be responsible for my own actions.”

“I know,” Duo said blithely, smiling and bouncing Liangyu on his lap. “But, y’know, high stress times don’t really bring out the best in anyone, do they?”

“Will you just-”

There was a crunch of gravel outside and Duo’s face lit up. He stood abruptly, cutting off Wufei and handing the baby over to him before dashing over to the front door. Bemused and slightly annoyed, he walked over to the window to see Duo jogging out to meet a large van. A clipboard was presented, the doors opened and the contents inspected, before the forms were signed with a flourish and the clipboard was tucked into the back of the van. Both Duo and the driver disappeared inside for a moment, and then reappeared, carrying between them a bathtub. A large bathtub. A very large bathtub.

There was some grunting and chuckling as the two of them brought it into the house and navigated up the stairs, before trotting back down and then repeating the process, each carrying parts for what looked like a fairly sizeable shower, and then a toilet, and a large towel rail, before several more trips followed with what were most likely boxes of tiles.

It was twenty minutes later when the van pulled away again, and Wufei cautiously made his way up the stairs and peeked into the main bathroom to find Duo delightedly pulling plastic wrapping
off the bath.

“This… doesn’t look like the bath you said you were going to buy,” he observed, finally.

“I changed my mind,” Duo told him cheerfully, balling the plastic up and tossing it to one side. “I thought this’d be better.”

“It’s certainly… a lot bigger.”

The tub was a large, freestanding affair, that Duo and the delivery man had managed to manoeuvre next to the large window, so the bather would be able to enjoy the view across the garden. And whoever was in the garden would be able to enjoy a view of the bather. Wufei pointed this out, and got an elaborate eye roll in response.

“I used to kill people as a day job,” Duo said. “You’re telling me you hadn't noticed all the windows were coated?”

“... I actually hadn't,” Wufei muttered. “But in my defence, in the few weeks we’ve lived here, I haven't had much cause to stand outside and look into the house.”

The braided man snorted, and turned back to the bath, looking pleased.

“Well, it’ll mean you can enjoy the view, without giving someone a view.”

“I thought you were just going to do a basic bathroom,” Wufei said. “This doesn’t look like basic bathroom stuff.”

“I was,” Duo agreed, scratching the back of his neck thoughtfully. “But, y’know, I heard girls like to pamper themselves, so doin’ it now saves me doin’ it when madam grows up a bit…”

“Why are you doing this?” Wufei demanded, irritation rising again with a vengeance. “If you’d said you were doing it to add value to the house, fine, I’d understand - but you keep framing it like you're doing it for us. The bathroom, the house - the marriage! Why? No-one's that good!”

“Maybe I am,” Duo snapped, suddenly, his casual demeanour disappearing. “Maybe I’m sick of watching my friend try to struggle on his own without askin’ for help, so I’m just givin’ the help you’re too boneheaded to admit you need!” He waved his hands wide. “Maybe I had a shitty childhood and I want to make sure your daughter gets better than that, 'cause I -” He stopped, frowned and pressed his lips together in a tight line, shaking his head.

Wufei scowled at him, temper meeting temper and the clash firing them both up.

“Because you what?”

“Because I fucking care!” The shout startled Liangyu, who began to fidget and whine in Wufei’s arms, and Duo clenched his fists, managing to drag his tone back down as he continued. “And there’s not much else I can do, so I’m tryin’ to make life as easy for you as I can - God knows you try and make it difficult enough! Bein’ a single parent ain’t easy.”

“You’re her parent too,” Wufei reminded him coldly, trying to quiet the disgruntled baby. “I watched you sign the forms.”

“Yeah, but I’m not really, though, am I?” Duo said, bitingly. “I’m the back-up Dad, in case something happens to you. I’m basically a Godparent, but we did it with paperwork instead of flickin’ water around.”
Startled, Wufei actually stepped back a little, absentmindedly stroking Liangyu’s head to soothe her. He felt a little winded, and evidently it showed on his face, because his friend groaned and scrubbed his hands over his face.

“That’s not - I mean, I want to be there for her,” he clarified. “But… she’s your kid really, isn’t she? Your word goes first. Like with the nicknames.”

There wasn’t much Wufei could think to say to that, instead he let out a long, slow breath, closing his eyes and counting to ten. When that provided no further clarity on how to respond, he simply turned and left the bathroom in silence.

As he padded down the hall, he heard the frustrated noise that Duo let out in the bathroom, and then the barely-audible sigh, before the rustling sounds of him getting back to work. Wufei’s stomach twisted, and he suppressed his own sigh. That… hadn’t gone how he had wanted it to go.

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Twenty minutes later, Liangyu was settled down for a nap, and Wufei reappeared in the bathroom door, holding two mugs of tea. Duo was on his hands and knees plumbing in the bath, but he rocked back on his heels and looked up cautiously as the other man held out a mug in peace offering.

He took it, and Wufei adjusted himself to sit beside him on the floor, both of them leaning back against the bath and sipping at the hot drinks.

“I’m sorry,” Wufei said finally. “That was what I was trying to say to begin with, but it appears that I am universally terrible at apologies. I’m sorry, for being thoroughly unpleasant, for seeming ungrateful for all your help. And for making you feel like you didn’t have a say in Liangyu’s life.”

“Look, man,” Duo replied, and he sounded tired. “I get it, okay? She’s your daughter.”

“The reason… the reason I don’t want to use nicknames with her, is because I’ve removed her from her history, and her culture. I don’t think taking her away from them was a bad thing,” he added hastily, as Duo opened his mouth to argue, “but I think it’s important for her to know she has a history and an identity more than just what she lives. And, when she’s still small, she won’t know the difference between ‘Liangyu’ and ‘Lia’. When she’s older, when she understands, it’ll be fine, but…”

Warm fingers wrapped around his forearm, and squeezed reassuringly. He looked up and saw Duo smiling gently at him.

“I get it,” he said. “I didn’t realise but… I get it. Hell, I ain’t got much of a pedigree, and even I’m still hangin’ on to where I’m from.” He chuckled and grabbed the end of his braid, waving it for illustration. “But you just had to say that, man. I’m not psychic.”

“Really?” Wufei quirked an eyebrow and managed a smirk. “I’m beginning to doubt that, given how regularly you seem to anticipate my needs before even I manage to know them myself.”

“That’s just bein’ friends,” Duo chuckled, and bumped his shoulder against Wufei’s gently.

“I’m sorry I’m not a better one. You deserve far more than me.”
“All I’ve ever wanted or needed is you,” Duo told him. “Just as you are.”

There was an undertone in the words, a gravity that Wufei couldn’t quite understand or grasp, and he felt it deep in his chest like a physical thing. Duo’s hand was still on his arm, and gave it another squeeze, firm but gentle, before he removed it, fingers brushing across the bare skin and making him shiver. Annoyed at the sensations, ridiculous and unfounded, he took a mouthful of tea and let the hot liquid scald his mouth a little, pulling him back to the present and focusing his mind. Beside him, Duo let out a huff of laughter, turning his own mug around in his hands thoughtfully.

“I kinda knew this would happen, once we told the others,” he said, at Wufei’s quizzical look. “I knew they’d say stuff, disrupt the status quo we had goin’.”

“Oh,” Wufei said, understanding. “Hilde?”

“Yeah, she laid into me but good. Who got you?”

“Quatre.”

“Ouch.” Duo winced. “Hilde only reamed me out, but no wonder you’ve been crabby, gettin’ done over by Captain Mindfuck.”

Wufei nearly snorted his tea out through his nose at that, and had to pause to wipe his face around chuckles. Yes, a mindfuck rather accurately described what Quatre had worked on him. But, he was curious about why Hilde had ‘reamed’ Duo out. In the same way the others had seemed more angry at Duo than at him, Hilde had seemed particularly irked at the dinner. Duo had insisted, years ago, that there was nothing romantic between the two of them, but Wufei suddenly wondered if there was a ‘yet’ hiding at the end of that sentence. Wondered if his worries that he would prevent Duo living his life had already come to pass.

And, thanks to Captain Mindfuck, he wondered what that meant for him, and how he really felt about it.

“What did Hilde say to verbally eviscerate you?” he asked, sounding as casual as he could. He wasn't mistaken that Duo tensed a little beside him.

“Er… just that I shouldn’t be forcin’ you to play house with me,” Duo said slowly, choosing his words very carefully. “And that this was a dumb idea, and was gonna end badly.” There was a pause, and Duo shot him a sideways glance. “What did Q say?”

“… Basically the same thing,” he said. That covered 'entirely the opposite’, didn't it? Besides, there was no way that Duo had just told him the whole truth, and Wufei had no personal moral code preventing him from lying when it suited him. Particularly when it came to the suggestion that Duo and Wufei make this marriage a more traditional affair, and Wufei’s own apparently mixed feelings on the whole subject.

Duo didn’t suspect, though, and snorted.

“I had a feelin’ they compared notes beforehand. When they all turned up at the same time, like an Intervention Convoy, that they’d had some kinda war council about us.”

Leaning his head back against the tub and stretching his legs out in front of him, Wufei contemplated the freshly-painted white ceiling.

“I suppose we should be thankful that our friends are so concerned for our wellbeing,” he said slowly. “Although I suspect it’s more for you than me.”
“You’re shittin’ me?” Duo stared at him. “Wufei, they’re concerned that I’m makin’ life hard for you. The only reason they didn’t get involved sooner was ‘cause they wanted to respect your space. They even told me not to bother you, ‘cause they were worried I’d make it worse, but –”

“But?”

“But… I have issues respecting boundaries?” Duo offered with a weak grin. “If you’d said to the others at all that you needed their help, you’ve gotta know that they’d have been in there with us. Hell, you might’ve ended up married to Sally instead!”

“Heaven forfend,” Wufei muttered dryly, trying to suppress his embarrassed smile, trying not to feel as touched by the declaration as he did.

He had never wanted to overestimate his relationship with the rest of the group, had always tried to work to what he knew and never assume a greater closeness or become a burden. Regardless of how much he respected and liked his friends, there had always been the voice telling him that he was only included because they would have felt guilty leaving him out of a small group, rather than due to any actual desire to spend time with him. That his presence was obligatory, rather than actually wanted. It wasn’t through any particular behaviours of theirs – they were all friendly – but Heero and Trowa were hardly demonstrative, and Relena and Quatre were friendly to everyone. Sally mainly dealt him verbal abuse, but he understood there was an affection there and he was able to return it happily. It did make the actual nature of their relationship hard to identify, however, when their interactions consisted mostly of jibes and baiting. Perhaps as a result of his desire not to impose, he had created limits himself where there were none to begin with.

Duo had been the only one who had ever earnestly sought out his company again and again, who had openly stepped over boundaries and established that none were present in their relationship. They were more than work partners, Duo had ensured that they were meshed in just about every element of their lives, had poked and prodded at each other so they knew exactly how they fitted together to the stage that where one was weak the other stepped forward now without even thinking. Instinctive cooperation, as natural as breathing. The way Duo had stepped up with the wedding, with the house. Taking care of the background things whilst Wufei got to know his daughter.

Why had he even thought he could manage this without Duo in the first place? Shame, that much was clear. He didn’t want Duo to see him weak and stressed, or to think less of him for being unable to care for his own flesh and blood by himself. He didn’t want to lose his place in Duo’s estimation – that was important.

“I think,” he said slowly, rubbing his thumb absentely across his wedding ring, and remembering what Duo had said to him, “I think that even if I’d had the whole world to choose from, I’d still have chosen you for this.”

Beside him, at that statement, Duo went very still. It wasn’t a startled jump, or a tension, just a stillness. When he glanced up, he saw a strange sort of wondrous expression on his face, the violet eyes studying him so carefully and intently, as if he were unable to process quite what had been said, and he didn’t want to move in case he scared Wufei off.

“That –” His voice was thick, and he paused, cleared his throat, tried again. “That means a lot, man.”

Something warm and heavy was curling through Wufei, and he felt a flush rising on his cheeks.

“Well,” he said, blithely, deflecting, “who could say no to that proposal? I’ve heard people dream
about getting an onion ring.”

Duo went with the deflection, almost looking relieved himself.

“Only the best for my husband,” he said, draining his mug. “Gotta treat the little man right.”

“I’m not that much shorter than you,” Wufei huffed, taking the empty cup off him and standing. He let out a startled noise as Duo swatted at his backside and winked at him.

“You’re the best little homemaker a fella could ask for,” he drawled, emphasising his accent with a wicked grin, as he resumed his position around the back of the bathtub.

“I’ll break your arm if you do that again,” Wufei promised, although it was affectionate and with a grin. Duo cackled in response.

“Honey, I think we should try counselling before we resort to violence!” he called after Wufei. “I think we can work, you just gotta accept me for who I am!”

Yes, Wufei thought, as he plodded down the stairs with the mugs. Duo was definitely the right choice for this. Even Quatre’s insidious words wouldn’t make him doubt that.

*

Later that afternoon, Wufei heard Liangyu making noises over the monitor, a sign that she was awake, and he headed to the bedroom to retrieve her.

He leaned over the bassinet and smiled down at her as she blinked up at him, kicking her legs thoughtfully.

“Do you feel better for that?” he murmured, reaching down and brushing his fingers gently over her cheeks. She cooed at him, and he froze, staring at her. “Duo,” he called, eyes still locked on the baby. “Duo, come here!”

There was some soft grunting down the hallway, and then the sound of hurried footsteps as Duo jogged along to see him,

“Everythin’ okay?” he asked, coming to stand beside Wufei and peer at Liangyu, brow wrinkled in concern.

“She smiled,” Wufei said.

“You’re sure it’s not gas this time?” Duo drawled, although he leaned closer, eager.

“I’m sure, look.”

He brushed his fingers over Liangyu’s cheek again, and her mouth opened in a wide gummy smile, eyes crinkling at the edges. Her eyes were locked on Wufei’s face, and she kicked her legs harder as he repeated the gesture, and she let out a series of happy ‘aaaaa’ sounds as her smile broadened.

“Holy shit,” Duo breathed, a wide, stupid grin across his face. “That’s the best thing I’ve ever seen.”
As Wufei took his hand away, Duo hesitantly reached in ran his fingers across her tummy, gently tickling her. He got another brilliant smile and baby-laugh in response, Liangyu’s gaze now fully on him. Stepping back, Wufei watched the expression of delighted awe on his face, and then listened as laughter bubbled out of him alongside Liangyu’s noises.

The warm feeling was back, deep in his chest, and he felt his own smile soften. Maybe he didn’t have a name for this yet, maybe Quatre had caused some confusion about where he stood, and where things were going.

But watching the scene in front of him, he certainly didn’t doubt the choices which had brought him to this point.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to Kangofu_CB for the beta! And for letting me refer to Quatre as "Captain Mindfuck".

- the definition of Storge I found was this one on Wikipedia:

Sometimes the term is used to refer to the love between married partners who are committed and plan to have a long relationship together, particularly as a fundamental relational foundation after initial infatuation (limerence).

Another interpretation for storge is to be used to describe a sexual relationship between two people that gradually grew out of a friendship —storgic lovers sometimes cannot pinpoint the moment that friendship turned to love. Storgic lovers are friends first, and the friendship, and the storge, can endure even beyond the breakup of the sexual relationship. They want their significant others to also be their best friends, and will choose their mates based on similar goals and interests – homogamy. Storgic lovers place much importance on commitment, and find that their motivation to avoid committing infidelity is to preserve the trust between the two partners. Children and marriage are seen as legitimate longterm aims for their bond, while passionate sexual intensity is of lesser importance than in other love styles.
Duo’s adoption paperwork came through on a Tuesday.

On the following Saturday, their friends descended on the house – sans Hilde, and Duo was a little ashamed of how relieved he was at that – carrying presents from them, and an oversized card and gift basket that was the result of a collection at the Preventers’ HQ, to Duo’s excitement and Wufei’s embarrassment.

As Trowa and Heero got to work christening the large brick barbecue built into the patio, Duo wasted no time in filling up the tiny paddling pool that had been amongst the presents and introducing Liangyu to it with gleeful support from Relena and Sally. This left Wufei alone with Quatre, the pair of them slicing salad for the large bowl of leaves in front of them, so that there was something to eat other than the vast quantity of meat that was piled up beside the barbecue, ready to be incinerated.

“How have you had a chance to think any more about what I said?” Quatre asked, his face the picture of innocence as he deftly diced a pepper and tossed it into the bowl. Wufei glared at him, throwing a handful of tomato in and grabbing another.

“Sometimes I violently dislike you,” Wufei hissed, and Quatre chuckled.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’,” he said pleasantly.

Scowling briefly at the tomato in his hand, Wufei tried not to be too aggressive in his chopping. Of course he’d been thinking about what Quatre said. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about it. Telling himself not to think about it had roughly the same effect as telling someone not to think of elephants. So, for the last month it had been on his mind almost constantly, and he was not entirely happy about the results.

Even as he contemplated that, he found himself looking up, eyes inexorably drawn to Duo where he was knelt on the grass, holding Liangyu and chatting to her as he showed her the pool full of water. She looked somewhat sceptical, and as she was lowered down into said water her face scrunched up and she let out an ear-rending wail. Startled and laughing, Duo swiftly hoisted her out of the pool and Relena swooped in with a large fluffy towel, whilst Sally splashed the water thoughtfully.

“Bloody hell, Duo, that’s freezing! I’d cry if you put me in that!”

“Oh, chick, I’m sorry,” he crooned to the baby in his arms, bouncing her gently trying to soothe her, as Sally marched into the kitchen to get some warmer water. “I thought it’d be refreshing, ‘cause it’s so hot out.”

Watching the two of them, Wufei felt like his chest was being constricted, and breathing was hard. His heart had never been so full, and it hurt.

In the month since the dinner, Wufei had realised that the reason he was so close to Duo, was so dependent on him, was because he was helplessly, deeply in love with him. Which was why he followed wherever Duo led, even as he worried about taking advantage, about losing him.
It hurt every day.

“Did you come to any conclusions after thinking?” Quatre asked, still as casual as if he were commenting on the weather.

“I don’t know what you had hoped to accomplish by starting this in the first place,” Wufei replied in a dark undertone, “but I never took you for cruel.”

“Cruel is a relative term,” Quatre said, looking thoroughly amused.

“Malicious, then. Spiteful.”

“I fail to see how broadening your horizons to the potential of happiness available to you fits any of those criteria,” Quatre told him, tossing the last of his chopping into the bowl, and picking up his cutting board to take it back into the kitchen.

Wufei followed hastily after him, and didn’t bother to hide his scowl once they were ensconced in the kitchen, Sally breezing out without even looking at them to go top up the paddling pool with something a little warmer than ice water.

“Your interference has made things… difficult,” he snapped, putting the board and knife in the dishwasher, and then relieving Quatre of his to do the same. “I was perfectly happy the way things were, and now…”

He straightened, trailed off, let out a frustrated sigh as he glared out the window and watched Duo and Sally bickering. Quatre leaned back against the counter and folded his arms, looking thoroughly amused with the situation.

“Now,” Quatre supplied helpfully, sounding fairly cheerful about the whole thing, “you see how much more you could have, how much happier you could be, and it’s painful not having it, and knowing that it will end eventually because you’ve set the limits on this marriage as temporary. Everything is wonderful, and everything is tragically bittersweet because it’s just out of reach and entirely fleeting.”

Startled, Wufei stared at him and found the blonde looking at him sympathetically, for all he had sounded upbeat. At Wufei’s questioning look, he merely brushed a hand across his chest, lingering briefly on his heart, before relocating his hands to his pockets, and resuming his previous chipper demeanour.

Well… that had been incisive. Pressing his lips firmly together, he moved to stand beside Quatre and took a long breath through his nose, letting it out slowly to get himself under control.

“What do you suggest, then?” he asked, acidly. “Since you’re so well acquainted with the situation.”

“I find, at times like this, honesty is nearly always the best policy.”

“Nearly always.”

“Hedging language, I was trying to use understatement to be funny.”

“I wouldn’t quit your day job.”

They stood side by side, Wufei leaning his hands on the counter and watching as a second attempt to get Liangyu into the paddling pool proved only marginally more successful than the first. Relena
attempted to distract her using a variety of rubber ducks and toy boats, while Duo chattered away to her enthusiastically, trying to prevent the frown on her face and the uncertain whine she was making developing into yet more screaming.

“What would I even tell him?” he asked, with a heavy sigh. Quatre shrugged, back to the window still, head turned to look only at Wufei.

“That’s down to you. The truth is usually plenty. Explain how you feel, ask him to stay.”

“Why would he say yes?” Wufei’s mouth twisted, a pained smile.

“Why **wouldn’t** he say yes?” Quatre countered. “At the moment, he’s leaving anyway, at some point, isn’t he? As per your agreement. So the only difference that could be made is that you get him to stay.”

“Or he could leave sooner,” Wufei murmured. “I could have longer if I don’t say anything.”

“Perhaps. But what if I told you we were close to finding a solution? That in two weeks you would be able to divorce and still keep custody of your daughter?”

Wufei couldn’t deny the slight flutter of panic, or the leaden feeling in his gut at the words. He let his hands curl into fists, and dropped his head, closing his eyes and pressing his lips together in a firm line. He should be happy. That should be good news. He would be releasing Duo from his commitment, and no longer be an obstacle to the other man’s happiness, whether that was with Hilde, or… or whoever. But the newly-named emotion, recognised less than a month ago, wanted more time. Wanted more everything, even as Wufei’s good sense told him that he would be better creating a distance.

“Are you that close?” he asked.

“We could be,” Quatre said. “Things were looking promising. But even if we weren’t, you shouldn’t take it for granted that this will last, because it won’t unless you say something.”

“…Could you at least tell me if he’s likely to react well?” Wufei asked finally, gesturing vaguely at Quatre’s chest and getting a wry grin in response.

“That’s not my place to say,” he told him cheerfully. “I can tell you how you’re feeling, because you already know that. Anything else is cheating, not to mention rude.”

“Damn you and your principles,” Wufei muttered, although it wasn’t without humour. Quatre laughed and nudged his shoulder against Wufei’s companionably.

“Just man up, Chang, and get it over with,” he advised. “You’ll feel better for it.”

Wufei just grunted in response.

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When Duo came down for breakfast the next morning, he found Wufei and Liangyu already up. Sat on the sofa from his old apartment, Wufei was leaning back with his glasses perched on his nose, mug of tea in one hand and book in the other. Liangyu rested on his lap, slumped backward
to rest against his stomach and chest, chewing on one of her rubber ducks and mumbling to herself. She managed to remove it from her mouth long enough to shout happily at Duo as he came into the room, before returning the unfortunate mallard to its gummy fate.

“Good mornin’ to you too,” he told her cheerfully, moving into the kitchen to make himself a coffee. “And well done on sleeping all through the night! More of that, please.”

“Aa!” Liangyu replied decisively, earning a chuckle from Wufei, who set his book aside to gently stroke the fluffy hair on her head.

“I think the excitement of the paddling pool and all the attention wore her out. I woke up a few times wondering what was wrong, and it was just that she hadn’t woken up.”

Moving back over to the sofas, Duo plonked himself on his old couch, sinking low into the overstuffed cushions. Sipping at his coffee, he took a moment to savour the view as Wufei bent his head to press a kiss to the baby’s head. He wondered if everyone felt like this, looking at their family. He wondered why people didn’t talk about it more, how precious this was.

“Hey,” he said quietly, because being too loud felt like it would be crass for such a moment. Wufei looked up at him, eyebrows raised expectantly, inviting him to continue. “I’m back at work on Monday, an’ I was thinkin’ there was some stuff we could get done while we were both still off?”

“Like what?”

“Well…” He took another mouthful of coffee, taking the moment to reorganise thoughts which had scattered when Wufei had looked at him. “Like, gettin’ a new sofa for in here maybe? Somethin’ we can both sit on. An’ then we can put one of these ones in the front room - make that a proper study, since there’s plenty of space in here for all of us.”

“Oh.” Wufei blinked, looked at the sofa he was sitting on consideringly, then at Duo’s. “I… suppose it would be nice not to be sitting separately,” he said slowly.

“We could head into the city? There’s a few stores, take Liangyu out on her first shoppin’ trip. Help her get used to hustle and bustle a bit maybe. Do lunch?” Duo tried his best not to sound too hopeful, the idea of a ‘day-date’ buying furniture and showing off their daughter - Hilde would have a lot of very rude words to say to him about this whole thing.

Monday. He’d be back to work on Monday, and then he’d work out what he was going to do. For now, he was going to enjoy it for the last few days of his leave.

“That sounds… really nice,” Wufei said, looking confused and frowning slightly.

“Try not to get too excited,” Duo said, raising an eyebrow. Wufei blinked at him, then shook his head and smiled, relaxed, open and apologetic, and jeez there went Duo’s heart again.

“Sorry, it does sound fun. I’m a little preoccupied, and I think getting out of the house will be a good idea.”

Yes, Duo thought. Out of the house and something else to focus on for a little while. Good plan.

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“Are you sure you wouldn't rather use the pram?”

“Nah, that’d be a pain in the ass through all the shops. This is fine, honestly.”

For Duo maybe, but Wufei was struggling, and it was ridiculous.

The baby carrier was strapped to the taller man, and Liangyu was nestled safely inside, dozing with her head against Duo's chest. There was something about how casually confident he was about it as they wound their way through the crowds in the city. Duo had never shrunk, always holding his head high and his shoulders back, carving his own space wherever he went, but somehow he seemed taller, even more of a presence with the carrier on.

It wasn’t like he had never seen Duo holding Liangyu - she was his daughter as well now, and they’d been living together with her for six weeks. He’d had time at length to watch the pair of them, marvel steadily more as the time had progressed. It was a strange feeling of love and pride watching them.

He hadn’t been lying when he had spoken to his friends all those weeks ago - he had been content, and he had been utterly certain that he wasn’t capable of love really. But now, every day, he was astounded by how much this was consuming him. He wasn’t familiar with this tenderness - all his life the strongest emotions that had driven him were rage and grief, righteous fury.

This, he didn’t know what to do with. He could dial the other feelings down to background noise through years of practice, but this was so new and unexpected it kept catching him unawares.

So, he trailed behind Duo as they wove through the streets, rucksack full of baby essentials on his back, and tried not to notice Duo’s arms, Duo’s shoulders, or all the women who were watching him as he strolled past, chatting to Liangyu, and occasionally tossing a comment over his shoulder to Wufei.

This was a nightmare.

“What do you think about this one?”

“It looks like a perfectly functional sofa.”

“Try and muster up a little enthusiasm,” Duo teased, and plonked himself down onto it. “I think this is just your sort of thing.” He patted the seat beside him and grinned up.

Rolling his eyes, Wufei perched beside him on the seat, maintaining a careful distance and sitting perfectly upright. That lasted approximately fifteen seconds before Duo grabbed the back of his rucksack and pulled him back to slouch across the cushions, startling a laugh out of him.

“You gotta sit like you mean it,” Duo told him. “Y’ain’t gonna be sittin’ at home like that.”

“Y’ain’t,” Wufei repeated, twisting from where he’d sprawled to raise an eyebrow.

“It’s a functional contraction. You understood it.”

“Maybe we should invest in elocution lessons for you,” he said, pulling himself back upright and taking off the backpack. “I would like our daughter to be able to form full words at some stage of her life.”

The phrase ‘our daughter’ had slipped out before he could stop himself. It wasn’t inaccurate, but it carried some additional weight perhaps, given Wufei’s feelings. He wondered if there was a flicker
of reaction across Duo’s face, but it was more likely his own paranoia.

He was getting too involved in this. Too committed to planning a life and a home together when it
might not last much longer. He needed to step back, or this was going to be a lot more painful.

Of course, that was easier said than done, when a warm hand was wrapping around his wrist,
pulling him to his feet and towing him over to another sofa. It was so easy to give into, so easy to
relax and let Duo’s charisma drag him in.

Maybe, for a little while, he could give into it.

*

It had been a weird day. Wufei had kept spacing out and frowning. Duo vaguely wondered if he’d
done something to piss him off, but every time he asked, he got a startled look, and then an
apologetic smile. He got the distinct feeling he was missing something, but had been unable to get
Wufei to explain what was wrong.

Once they’d got into the department store, Wufei had seemed to shake it off a bit, and they’d
chosen a large corner sofa than met Duo’s requirements for comfiness and Wufei’s for structural
solidity, arranging delivery for later in the week. Duo had then managed to convince Wufei that the
porch swing would be a great idea. It had been fun, nice, relaxed with bickering and chatting, like a
normal couple. A normal family.

But it seemed that the minute he’d thought that, Wufei had switched off again, suddenly retreating
and falling quiet again. It had been a little disheartening, and also filled Duo with the sudden panic
that Wufei was able to read his mind.

The drive home had been in silence, and Wufei had disappeared upstairs with Liangyu to set her
down for a nap, whilst Duo unloaded the car, and hauled the box with the swing around to the back
of the house, deciding that, in lieu of anything better, he might as well set it up now. Retrieving his
toolbox and ladder, he began the process of drilling bolts into the large pergola over the patio,
down the far end to give a view across the garden and fields behind.

He was most of the way through assembling the seat before Wufei reappeared, standing on the
threshold to the patio, frowning and looking torn. Glancing over his shoulder, he weighed it for a
second, before turning back to finish off his work. Coaxing hadn’t worked all day, if Wufei wanted
to tell him something he would.

That didn’t mean he couldn’t feel the tension crawling up his back, tightening his shoulders and
making his stomach churn. His mind was heading directly to the worst place - somehow Wufei had
found out how he felt, was furious, was going to leave, and everything would be ruined.

He was nothing if not a fatalist.

“Do you have a minute?” Wufei asked eventually, and Duo suppressed a sigh.

Tapping his screwdriver against the finished swing seat, he stood and forced a relaxed smile.

“Help me hang this, and then we can sit,” he suggested.
Inclining his head, Wufei moved towards him - smoothly, silently, always so in control of his movements - and lifted one side of the chair so the chain would reach the hook above for Duo to clip it into place, repeating the process on the other side. Hopping off the ladder, the American took his time arranging the cushions on the seat, ignoring the irritated breath that Wufei let out, before he settled on one end and waited for his husband to take a seat on the other.

Then - silence. Another long silence. Awkwardly, Duo rocked the swing, enjoying the movement, and looked across the view. Tried not to look at Wufei, tried not to fidget.

“I was talking to Quatre again yesterday,” Wufei said, finally, and boy did the tension ramp up at that.

“...Yeah?” Duo was impressed his voice mostly sounded normal, relaxed. “What did Captain Mindfuck have to say this time?”

He got a half-smile for that, but it didn’t last.

“He… suggested they may be close to finding a solution to the custody issues with Liangyu. He wasn’t sure how long exactly. But, soon perhaps.”

“Oh.” That hadn’t been what he’d expected. He couldn’t decide if that was worse, and the loss that swept through him was almost a physical sensation, his throat tightening. “I guess… that means we’ll be able to go back to normal again quicker than we thought?”

“That seems to be the case,” Wufei agreed, but even he sounded a little morose about it. Chancing a glance sideways, he saw the other man looking at his hands, folded neatly in his lap, shoulders drooping and expression melancholy.

“That was the plan… right?” Duo asked, hesitantly. It had been the only way he’d been able to get Wufei to agree to this, and whilst he’d been happy to help get Wufei his daughter, he’d been dreading it.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Wufei said, and Duo got the impression he was choosing his words very carefully. “Which may change things. But I feel like you should know, and - and if this impacts your decisions at all, I understand.”

“Okay…”

Wufei glanced at him, then away quickly. He took a deep breath, nodded to himself, and then straightened his shoulders, preparing himself. Duo watched this, puzzled and anxious. This meant something big. Big wasn’t necessarily good.

“I understand that you agreed to this on the basis that our relationship was entirely platonic, and as such would cause no issues when the marriage was eventually dissolved. But… in the time we have lived together, I’ve come to realise that is not the case.”

And there was the panic, clawing its way up his throat.

“Look, man, I’m sorry. I know I should have said somethin’, but honestly I didn’t-”

Wufei wasn’t listening, focused instead on what he needed to say.

“You are my closest and most valued friend, and… I have realised that what I feel for you is somewhat more than that as well. I would like - would deeply like - if this marriage could continue, as a real relationship, even if Quatre’s lawyers are able to come up with a solution. But I
know that’s not what was agreed, and that your interests probably lie… elsewhere.” He paused, cleared his throat. “I just wanted you to know this was an option.”

Silence again. A long silence. Duo stared at him, tried to work out just what had been said, if he had heard that right. His hand clenched the arm of the swing so hard his knuckles were white, and his mouth was working but he was unable to produce any sound.

After several moments, Wufei let out a sigh and nodded, decisively, standing.

“I understand,” he said, and sounded resigned. “I hope you won’t hold it against me that I mentioned this, and that we can continue to be friends as we were before.”

“No, wait! Wait!”

Duo wasn’t aware of standing, nor how he covered the space between himself and the other man - he was just aware of the panic that rocked through him as Wufei turned to leave.

One minute he was sat, stunned, and the next he was pulling the shorter man against him, hand around his wrist and tugging him into a desperate grip. He barely had a second to register the startled expression on his face, before his instincts took over and his lips were pressed firmly to Wufei’s.

It took him a moment to process what he had done, what was happening, but it seemed Wufei was equally thrown by the action, and then suddenly both of them were clinging to each other, deepening the kiss with vigour. There was too much to take in - the feeling of Wufei’s lips, his tongue, his skin under Duo’s fingers - hands brushing up his arms, across his back, cupping his cheek, holding his neck - he didn’t know what to do or where to stop.

And Wufei’s hands were the same, pulling him down towards his face, gripping his hips and trying to pull him closer, impossibly close.

It was electric, outstanding, overwhelming, and the force of it made him pull back, gasping and startled as he stared down at his partner, who was staring back up at him, breathing just as heavy, looking just as stunned.

“All that, back there,” Duo breathed. “Did you mean it? Did you mean this?” He waved his hand between them.

“I did,” Wufei said, flush high on his cheeks and eyes dark with lust but expression grave. “Everything it entailed.”

“Jesus.” Duo brushed his fingers across his cheek, awed and still unable to fully process it. “Seriously? Really and actually?”

“I thought your comprehension skills were faster than this,” Wufei drawled, arching an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry. It’s just… I’ve fantasised about hearing you say that for years. I worried I was dreaming it, that you’d said something else…”

“No, you heard correctly - wait, years ?”

“Ah.” Whoops. “Um. Yeah. About that…”

“That’s why you kept insisting we’d be able to divorce,” Wufei said slowly, leaning back and frowning at Duo. “You were reminding yourself… How long?”
“Look, man,” Duo insisted, letting Wufei step away a little, “it wasn’t - I didn’t suggest this marriage thing for any weird reason. I just - I didn’t want you to leave and go back to L5.”

“How long?” Wufei asked again, calmly. This wasn’t the reaction Duo had expected, and he paused, confused.

“Uh… I dunno any more,” he confessed. “It’s been… I dunno. Ages. I’m sorry I didn’t say anythin’ sooner, but I just…”

He trailed off, helplessly, wondering if he had managed to ruin everything he’d ever dreamed of just because he couldn’t stop running his mouth. Wufei just continued to study him, silently, thoughtfully, and Duo fidgeted, rubbing his hands on his jeans and shifting his weight.

“No,” Wufei said, finally, reaching a hand up to push some of Duo’s bangs out of his face consideringly. “I don’t know how long it’s been either. And I don’t know how much longer it would have been without me realising, if Quatre hadn’t said something…”

“Can we not talk about Quatre?” Duo asked, almost weak with relief and pulling Wufei closer again when he received no resistance. “I just… I want to…”

“Yes?”

This kiss was slower than the last one, more hesitant. The first brush of lips was gentle, the next only slightly more confident, as Duo took his time to savour this moment. The smell of the shorter man, the texture of his lips against Duo’s, the warmth of him against Duo’s chest, in his arms. Slowly, reverently, he catalogued everything. Every sound, movement, sensation, he didn’t want to forget any of this.

Wufei tilted his head back, melded against him and pulled him in, letting things deepen, progress.

And there it was, all the years of repressed lust surging up and unleashed at the tiny groan that rumbled in Wufei’s throat. He was met pace for pace as he curled his hand around the back of the other man’s head, and tugged their hips together, heat rising and hearts pounding. What little conscious thought was left in Duo’s brain was wondering if it would be worth testing how securely the swing seat was fastened -

The baby monitor set on the table beside them crackled, followed by the tinny cry of tiny lungs.

“Shit,” Duo muttered, wrenching himself away. “Cock blocked by the baby.”

“Don't say that,” Wufei said, although he looked a little frustrated too. “It's probably best we don't get too carried away too quickly anyway. We don't want to rush things.”

Duo couldn't help but laugh at that as he followed Wufei into the house.

“We’re already married!” he called after him, watching him disappear up the stairs. “What's there to rush?”

The look he got for that was equal parts amusement and exasperation. He responded with a saucy wink, and headed back into the kitchen to prep the bottle that would be imminently needed.

*
A life of intense survival training, and an adolescence spent as a weapon of warfare, meant that it did not take much to wake Wufei from his sleep. Fortunately it also meant that he was alert and processing very shortly after that.

Fortunate, because it meant that when he woke in alarm sensing another presence in his room, he didn’t immediately attack the intruder - who turned out to be Duo, stood at the foot of the bed, holding a bottle and frowning at the bassinet in sleepy confusion.

He sat up and peered through the darkness.

“Everything alright?” he asked, in an undertone.

“I could’ve sworn …” Duo replied, clearly baffled. “Wasn’t she cryin’? I thought I heard…”

“No,” Wufei said, realising what had happened and trying not to laugh. “It’s looking like she might sleep straight through again.”

“Oh man.” Duo let out a tired sigh, and looked at the bottle in his hand, shaking his head. “I’m sorry. Guess my brain didn’t think she’d do it twice in a row. Sorry.”

He turned to go, shaking his head still, and Wufei quietly called to stop him. When Duo looked back, he shifted over in the bed and pulled the sheets aside.

“You might as well stay in here,” he said, the darkness hiding the flush that had appeared on his cheeks. “She’ll be up in a few hours anyway.”

Duo hesitated, then came across, setting the bottle on the bedside table, and pausing with one knee on the mattress. The shadows obscured the nuance of his expression as Wufei looked up at him, but he could imagine the slight crinkle of his eyebrows, the way he was chewing on the corner of his lower lip thoughtfully.

“You sure ‘bout this?” he asked. “I mean, you wanted to take things slow…”

“It’s just sleeping, Duo,” Wufei said dryly, “get in.”

He got a snort in response, and then the mattress dipped and bounced as Duo clambered under the sheet and wriggled down until his head was on the pillow. He rolled onto his side and their breath mingled as they looked at each other in the dark - unable to really see, but perfectly able to picture what was in front of them. Suddenly they were hyper-aware of everything - the warmth of the body beside them, the scent, the change in the air.

“Well,” Duo said finally, and his voice seemed rough with a little more than sleep. “I’ll see you in the morning, I guess.

“Goodnight,” Wufei said. “Try not to have any more dreams about the baby crying, or she might actually do it.”

“Oh, blow me,” came the response, as Duo rolled over, tugging his braid up and over the pillow, out of the way.

“We’re taking things slow,” Wufei reminded him, unable to suppress a smirk. Duo reached blindly behind him to swat at him, and Wufei caught his wrist, running his fingers over his hand gently.
The skin under his hand, rough with callouses and scars, was warm, and the thrill that curled through his stomach was surprising at such a simple touch. He could hear the other man’s breath catch, feel the goosebumps suddenly appear up his arm, felt his own skin react in answer. It was a sensation like he’d never known, and it overwhelmed him.

“Goodnight,” he said again, his voice thick.

“...Goodnight,” Duo breathed.

*

The sofa arrived the next afternoon, and once it was in place, they stood and stared at it, and tried not to laugh. They sat on it. Then they lay on it, Duo’s feet one way, Wufei’s feet the other, heads beside each other in the corner of the L-shaped furnishing as they stared up at the ceiling.

“In my defence,” Duo said, “it looked a lot smaller in the shop.”

“Perhaps we should buy several more, larger sofas, in order for it to appear a sensible size in context,” Wufei suggested, and Duo could hear him smirking.

He reached out without looking to swat at Wufei’s arm around the corner, and found his hand grabbed again, as it had been the night before. Fingers which could break bones encircled his wrist, stroking across the underside so lightly, and just as the night before his whole body caught fire and his breath stuttered out of rhythm.

Years of desire, of fantasising, of daydreaming about being intimate with the man sharing the sofa, and he was undone by nothing more complex than holding hands.

Duo lay there, still, and concentrated on keeping his lungs working, his heart rate under control, as Wufei slipped his hand down further, pressed their palms against each other, lacing their fingers together. He held them up, as if he were contemplating them, considering what was happening.

And then he moved, shifted, and the next thing he knew, Wufei was leaning over him, hand smoothing up his arm to his shoulder, barely repressing his smirk, or the heat in his eyes, as he leaned down and kissed him.

Duo’s groan was swallowed, but now his hands were free, he was able to grab his husband’s hips and pull him over, onto him, pressing them both together. The weight of the other’s body above him was glorious, impossible, and all-consuming. He kissed back hungrily, losing himself in the headiness of the embrace.

They shifted, one of Wufei’s legs sliding between his, and suddenly there were echoed groans.

The kiss ended, they stared at each other from the close distance, hearts hammering in synchronicity.

“I gotta ask,” Duo said, his voice strained, “how committed are you to takin’ things slow?”

“Increasingly less so,” Wufei replied, equally husky.

“We’ve been married nearly three months, and we’ve not consummated yet,” Duo pointed out,
trying for reasonable. “That’s fairly slow, if you think about it.”

“I understand it’s traditional to ‘christen’ new items of furniture,” Wufei added, clearly catching onto his train of thought. “And I am a traditionalist at heart.”

“Besides,” Duo agreed, “there were some concerns regardin’ the size of this sofa. I think we should address those thoroughly.”

“For science.”

“I’m convinced, are you convinced?”

“Thoroughly.”

“Good.”

He tugged Wufei back down towards him as the other man was already moving, and the kiss was hard and fast and brutal.

The lust had barely dimmed past a simmer in the brief interlude. Dextrous hands found their way under his shirt and pushed it up, stroking across his stomach and chest, making his muscles twitch and his blood boil.

This was nothing like he’d dreamed. It was so much better.

It didn’t take much convincing to tug his tshirt over his head and throw it aside, and Wufei’s followed soon after. Sprawled as he was on the sofa, Duo could just look up and marvel at the sight. Tight muscles and tanned skin, littered liberally with scars. Rocked back onto his heels, he sat proud above him, shoulders squared, head held high with more dignity than Duo had ever seen even outside the bedroom.

The dark gaze that focused on him was full of heat and force, and the sensation was physical.

Duo surged upwards, his lips drawn to the glorious collarbone, where it joined the neck and the shoulder. Above him, he heard the hiccuping breath, felt the hands braced on his shoulders tighten as he ran his mouth across the skin in front of him, tasting, feasting.

He trailed down and took a dusky nipple into his mouth, running his teeth gently across it. The grip loosened. He did it again, and Wufei seemed to fidget slightly.

Pausing, he pulled back, and peered up quizzically to see Wufei peering down at him in confusion.

“What’re you doing?” Wufei asked.

“Is that not - is that not good?” Duo responded, confused.

“It’s… not really anything,” Wufei told him. “But, if you’re enjoying yourself, by all means…”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean -”

“Is that something you enjoy?”

“I - yeah, that’s why I thought…”

He trailed off, Wufei fixing him with a wicked grin and pushing him back down onto the sofa. The next thing he knew, he had a thigh between his legs, and a mouth on his nipple, stealing his breath.
from his throat and driving him towards distraction. He writhed up towards it, gasping helplessly and arching up towards the sensations. Wufei was playing him like an instrument and Jesus, he was happy to sing -

The baby monitor crackled.

The cry filled the air.

“She’s my daughter, and I love her,” Wufei muttered, resting his forehead on Duo’s chest and slowly levering himself up and bracing himself on his elbows. “She’s my daughter, and I love her.”

“She’s my daughter, and I’m wonderin’,” Duo groaned, pressing his hands into his eyes.

He got a pinch in the side for that, as Wufei rolled off him and snagged his shirt.

“When she’s got a boyfriend, I’m going to take great delight in standing outside her bedroom door and yelling all evening,” Duo told Wufei.

“She’s never going to have a boyfriend,” Wufei said, irritably, stomping out of the room. “Not if she keeps behaving like this. It’s not going to endear her to any potential partners.”

*

Pushing herself to sit up on the edge of the bed, Sally stretched hugely, working out the kinks in her back and scratching the back of her neck.

“I still can’t believe Wufei’s got a baby,” she said, vaguely, looking into middle-distance, considering the facts of the matter. “I can almost deal with the whole surprise baby, marriage of convenience with Duo. It’s just taking all that and adding **Wufei** to the mix that things suddenly warp out of sync.”

Behind her came an amused snort, and her companion rolled onto his side, reaching to snag his phone from the nightstand. She twisted, and swatted at the bare backside presented to her as the sheets were pulled away by the movement.

“What?” she demanded.

“You’re lucky I’m not the jealous sort,” Trowa said mildly, tangling his hand with hers as he rolled back. “or I might take it personally that you’re thinking about Wufei after what we’ve just done.”

Sally snorted herself and tugged her hand away, standing to start retrieving her clothes.

“Like you would be jealous.”

“It’s only that I know full well you’d smother him in his sleep that I’m not filled with burning passion,” he told her, deadpan, as he checked his messages. “Trust me, there might have been fisticuffs.”

“You can’t tell me it’s not weird for you,” she accused, pulling her trousers on. Trowa glanced up from his phone briefly to watch the material slide over her hips, the way it clung as she buttoned the fly, with the barest hint of a smile playing around the corners of his lips.
“I’ve had a few months to become accustomed to the idea,” he said. “It’s not exactly new information any more.”

“It’s going to be really strange when they start back at work,” Sally mused, ignoring him and twisting to tug her bra into place. “Duo’s going into Cyber Crimes from Monday.”

“Not being paired up with Carter?”

“No-one deserves Carter, and you know it.”

Chuckling, Trowa swung his legs over the other side of the bed and began to gather his own clothes up. Sally continued to extemporise, at length, about how odd things would be, how things had changed for the bizarre behind him as he dressed.

“Did you ever want kids?” he asked, eventually, cutting her off.

“I - what?”

“Kids,” he repeated. “Small people. Did you ever want any?”

She looked at him, blouse half-buttoned, in astonishment. Her hair was still mussed, and the flush across her chest hadn’t yet completely dissipated. She looked thoroughly debauched, and he took a moment to enjoy the view.

“I hadn’t thought about it,” she confessed. “I didn’t think it’d ever come up. You need a relationship for that.”

“We’re in a relationship,” he pointed out, and she nearly stabbed herself with her fingernail, hand slipping on the next blouse button. “I understand that’s what it is when two people sleep with each other, exclusively, for a long time.”

“Well,” she said slowly, “we’d have to tell people we were in a relationship.”

Trowa quirked an eyebrow at her, sliding his arms into his own shirt.

“I don’t have a problem with that, if you want to.”

“I didn’t think they needed to know, but I figured if you’d wanted to tell them you’d have said something already.”

He shrugged.

“They didn’t need to know before. But, if you wanted kids, maybe they would. I’m happy to follow your lead.”

Sally frowned, thoughtful, as she finished buttoning her blouse and rummaged through her bag for a hairbrush. Circling around the bed, he came up behind her and placed his hands on her hips, lightly kissing the nape of her neck.

“You’re going to get smacked in the face with a brush if you stay there.”

“I’ll risk it.”

She swatted him away and started unsnarling her hair, trying to brush it back into shape, frowning into the mirror as she did so. He sat and pulled his socks on, finger-combing his hair absently into place.
“Do you want kids?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” Trowa said, “it hadn’t come up. But your friends have a baby and suddenly you start thinking, ’huh, babies. Those are a thing.’”

Sally rolled her eyes and let out a huff of laughter.

“Babies are a thing,” she agreed. “Are… are they a thing you might want?”

“I don’t know,” he said, leaning back on his hands and looking at the ceiling in contemplation. There was a cobweb in the far corner - he’d have to get that with the duster later. “I don’t think I’d miss it if I didn’t have them. But I don’t think I’d be averse to it either.”

“Huh.”

Sally tapped her brush against the palm of her hand, and looked like she was about to say something, but she was interrupted by her phone ringing. He watched her fish it out of her bag and raise her eyebrows at the identity of the caller, before she answered it.

All her movements were familiar at this stage, he could recall them all perfectly, after several years of intimate study. It had started with a few casual, easy hook-ups, both of them too practical and pragmatic to be looking for serious relationships. Eventually, though, it had become more comfortable, more regular, and without really discussing or agreeing to it, they had stopped going to anywhere else. Stopped thinking of it as a temporary thing, or just basing it on sex. Instead it had become natural to seek each other out if they had nothing else on, even just for company.

Neither of them was romantically-minded, and neither of them prone to demonstrative acts of affection, so it simply hadn’t come up with their friends. An announcement seemed to display a self-congratulatory sense of arrogance that their personal lives were of enough import that their friends would care. So they had just carried on, as they were, but with increasingly more time spent together outside of work and group gatherings.

It was comfortable, they matched well and enjoyed each other’s company. It was warm, easy, and Trowa felt entirely content.

He supposed that it could be called love, if either of them had the inclination. But they’d never needed to speak about it. Seemed to be on the same page.

Although, given Sally’s earlier surprise, perhaps not.

She hung up abruptly, and turned to him with a wolfish grin.

“Alright sunshine,” she said cheerfully. “You were wondering about babies. You’re getting a crash course in babies.”

* 

Sally had been thoroughly apologised to, and bribed with a promise of a really nice dinner when she dropped the baby home that evening, but despite it all, Duo still felt a little guilty as he knocked on the door, car seat full of baby in hand, for begging childcare off her.
She opened the door, however, and totally ignored him, diving straight for the carry seat and divesting him of it swiftly, talking happily to Liangyu, who burbled in response and tried to grab her pigtails. Duo followed her in, dumping the nappy bag on the dining table, and was surprised to see Trowa leaning against the kitchen counter, looking amused.

“What’re you doin’ here?” he asked.

“Sally and I had just finished a round of wild sex when you called,” Trowa deadpanned. “I figured the least I could do was hang around and help with the baby.”

Duo rolled his eyes and snorted, digging through the bag again to find the bottle he had prepared, tossing it to Trowa. The taller man caught it deftly, as he always did, and slid it into the fridge.

“That one’s good for another couple of hours, but there’s more formula in the bag if it gets any later than that, or she eats it all.”

“Why the emergency childcare call?” Trowa asked mildly, pushing away from the side and coming over to poke through the nappy bag at the supplies that had been stuffed in there. Duo tried not to let the flush he felt rising up his neck meet his face.

“Somethin’ came up that we needed to get done,” he said, forcibly casual. “It’s harder when she’s there and we have to keep stoppin’ to check on her.”

“...Uh-huh.” Trowa was peering at him suspiciously, and looking terribly amused. “Well, you have fun. Six o’clock for dinner, yeah?”

“Yeah. Thanks for this.”

“Piss off and let me spend time with my Goddaughter,” Sally called from where she was bouncing Liangyu on her lap.

“We’re not religious,” Duo called back, with a grin, but he scooted for the door anyway. “See you guys later. Thanks!”

He all but ran down the stairs, back to the car where Wufei was waiting for him with a bag from the pharmacy, full of essentials it turned out they didn’t have at home. The sight of it made his stomach clench in excitement. It was going to be a long drive home.

“That took longer than I thought,” Wufei said, as they slid into the car.

“Trowa was there,” he explained, buckling up and gunning down the road perhaps more quickly than was necessary.

“...Are we bad parents,” Wufei asked, after a moment, “for giving our daughter to someone else so we can have sex?”

Duo laughed, surprised, and grinned at his husband, who was looking torn between embarrassed, guilty, and amused.

“Well, most parents have sex before they get the baby,” Duo pointed out, getting a nod of acknowledgement in response.

“We have done things rather backwards, haven’t we?”

Glancing sideways, he could see Wufei looking at him in fond amusement, and felt an answering
grin tug at his own lips. Baby, then marriage, then love? Yeah, that was probably backwards.

“Wouldn’t change it for the world,” Duo told him, reaching over and squeezing Wufei’s knee. He felt warm, calloused fingers wrap over his and squeeze back in answer, briefly, before letting him bring his hand back to shift gears.

Time to show off another reason they got a car that could go really fuckin’ fast.

*

It had started off well, as encounters went. They’d tumbled through the front door and toed off their shoes, managing to get up the stairs whilst attempting to grope and kiss each other, almost giddy with the freedom of having the house to themselves.

They’d made it to Wufei’s bedroom, and shed jeans and shirts, lips locked and hands exploring as they stumbled blindly across the carpet and toppled onto the bed.

And fell asleep.

It hadn’t been instantaneous. But once they had found themselves horizontal, heads on pillows, their movements had gradually slowed, become less frantic and their breathing deeper as their muscles relaxed.

It was only when Duo slowly woke up, curled around Wufei, blinking stupidly at the window and wondering where he was, that he realised what had happened. Huffing a laugh, he rubbed his face against Wufei’s spine, getting a sleepy groan in response. Even if it hadn’t turned out quite as planned, this was really rather wonderful - warm and relaxed, dozy and comfortable. A different kind of intimacy from the one planned, but something precious anyway.

Wufei briefly curled into himself more tightly, before unfurling and stretching with another massive groan. He rolled into his back and peered up at Duo in confusion, looked around the room with a frown, and then back at Duo.

“What happened?” he murmured muzzily.

“We fell asleep,” Duo told him gently, leaning down to press a light kiss to the puzzled pout. Wufei hummed happily.

“What time is it?”

Twisting, Duo peered over his shoulder to see the clock on the bedside table.

“Only three. We’ve got time to get dinner ready before Sally and Trowa get here.”

“We’ve got time for other things too.”

Wufei had shifted against him, and was pressed full up against his side, warm and hard in more ways than one. Surprised, Duo turned back and saw the sleepy, half-lidded gaze focussed on him, and a lazy smile. If he hadn’t been half-hard already, seeing that view had certainly done it for him.

“Should’a known you were a morning person,” he muttered, and let himself be tugged down for another long, indulgent kiss.
“It’s mid-afternoon,” Wufei pointed out as they parted.

“Past time to be awake then.”

Duo shifted his weight, leaning over the shorter man and enjoying the feeling of their bare skin together. Luxurious and hedonistic, they kissed, and stroked, and rocked against each other, with whispers of breath, throaty laughs, and languid moans. A gentle, coiling heat that built between them.

Smoothing his hands over the body beneath him, Duo enjoyed the tingle in his palms as he brushed across scars, admired the way Wufei looked, spread out and indolent in the afternoon sunshine. He was as relaxed as Duo had ever seen him - pliable and open, and thoroughly debauched-looking, with reddened lips and flushed cheeks, hair mussed. He was looking up at Duo with a hungry expression, tinged with a bit of wonder.

“Why did it take me so long to realise?” he murmured, as his hand brushed across Duo’s cheek, around to the back of his neck and across his shoulders, eyes tracking the path his hand went.

“Realise what?” Duo asked, leaning into the touch, feeling delicious sensations curl through him as the hand drifted around again, over his chest, and lower. “Ah!”

“That I’d memorised your face,” Wufei purred, his fingers loosely wrapped around Duo, exploring, teasing, as he studied Duo’s reactions. “That I’d committed all your expressions to memory. Could picture how you’d look in any situation. How you’d look like this…”

He tightened his hand just slightly, and his lips curled into a self-satisfied smirk as Duo gasped and thrust into his grip.

“Is it as good as you pictured?” he managed to stammer out.

“Better,” Wufei said.

And then he moved, and suddenly Duo was on his back, crying out in surprise as Wufei licked a long trail up his cock, and then swallowed him. Strong hands pinned his hips in place, and he was just left to let out a stream of whispered expletives and thanks to however he had got to this stage, and he looked down and watched his erection slowly emerge from Wufei’s lips before being taken back inside again, agonisingly slowly.

He fisted his fingers in the sheets and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hold on to his sanity, to make things last. His whole body taut, sensitive, focused on that single point between his legs where all his dreams were coming true.

It was almost painful when Wufei pulled away, and he couldn’t stop the noise he made, even though it was helpless and needy. He wasn’t even mad that Wufei laughed, because that chuckle was deep and throaty and really fucking sexy.

“Where are you goin’?” he demanded, propping himself on his elbows to see Wufei leaning off the edge of the bed, muscles taut beneath his skin and utterly glorious.

“We need some assistance for the next stage, as I understand it,” Wufei told him, sitting back up and dangling the tube he had purchased earlier. He crawled back across the mattress and Duo’s mouth went dry. “Do you have any preferences as to… arrangements?”

“Whatever you want,” he managed to croak out, staring helplessly at the view above him. “I don’t - I don’t mind either way.”
“Hmmm…” Wufei’s head dipped, and lips were brushed across his collarbone, up his neck, to his ear. “For this time, then, I’m enjoying having you there, if that’s okay?”

“Jesus, yes.”

There was some shifting, some adjusting, and then Wufei was kneeling between his legs, taking Duo’s cock into his mouth once more, tongue swirling around the tip - incredible, amazing, too slow to do more than torture him. He almost didn’t notice the first cool finger teasing his entrance except as one more incredible stimulus vibrating through him. A brief spark of discomfort, and then a sense of something in there, moving. Slowly, in and out, until he was pushing back against it as he tried to press into Wufei’s mouth, and then a second finger.

Together they thrust in and out with such care, stretching and filling. A third finger and Duo began to wonder if Wufei was ever going to fuck him, or if he was just going to keep him there, constantly being driven mad with tender caresses, until he exploded. Duo could deal with rough sex, frantic sex, hard and fast, but this slow, drawn-out influx of feeling was something he didn’t know how to handle.

“I’m done, I’m ready, please,” he said, reaching down to stroke Wufei’s hair, trying to pull him up. “Please…”

Lifting his head, Wufei looked up at him with a wicked grin.

“You’re in such a rush,” Wufei said, moving up to kiss him soundly. “We’re not going to have many chances to take our time, we might as well enjoy it.”

“Oh no, don’t go fuckin’ zen on me,” Duo groaned, arching up into him. “I’ve waited too fuckin’ long for this fucking.”

There was a chuckle, and then Wufei disappeared briefly. When his weight re-settled over Duo, it was accompanied by a pressure against him, delicious and firm.

“Yessss…” His triumph turned into a long hiss as the man above him pressed inside, incrementally slowly, and with a hitch of breathing that betrayed his own iron control.

It was too much, it was way too much, and all Duo could do was ride it out and pull Wufei down into a hard, deep kiss as the two of them lay there, intertwined and adjusting. He was so full, not just physically.

In his life, Duo wasn’t used to getting what he wanted. And the few times he had got it, it had been hard-won and difficult. Not reverent and soft, like this. Like the oh-so-tiny thrusts Wufei was starting to make, soothing and stroking him as he did so. This wasn’t what he was about.

“Can… can you just move already?” he choked out, tilting his hips to try and draw him in deeper, chasing after more sensation.

In response, Wufei lengthened his strokes, but didn’t go any faster. He was braced on his forearms over Duo, and all the American could do was rock to meet him, and watch as Wufei slowly came apart. His head was tilted back, his mouth slightly open and his eyes tight as he tried to control himself, tried to maintain this pace. Each thrust was bringing him that tiny bit nearer to where he wanted to be, and despite the leisurely pace, he was soon gasping for breath, clawing down Wufei’s back and trying to press his hips further.

“You’re so impatient,” Wufei huffed, although the muscles in his shoulders and neck were tight, and Duo could feel his heartbeat thrumming in his chest, and in every twitch of the cock deep
inside him. He was close to breaking, close to letting it all go.

“It’s too much,” Duo gasped. “I just need… I need it harder.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Jesus fuck, Wufei, I’ve taken enough shit in my life, I can handle your cock!”

He had shifted as he said it, and the angle had changed and Wufei brushed against that magic spot deep inside him with his next thrust and the startled groan he let out as he clenched down and pushed back seemed to catch Wufei by surprise.

“Do that again,” he begged. The Chinese man was glad to oblige, and Duo’s head rolled back onto the pillow, legs hooking over Wufei’s hips and trying to pin him in place, grinding against him.

There was a hitch of breath, and the legs between his shifted slightly, to give more purchase. Then Wufei’s long thrusts had an extra snap to them, more urgency, and each was accompanied by a breathless gasping moan, getting louder, more helpless, more insistent.

That noise, combined with that extra spark of sensation setting fireworks off behind his eyes, had Duo helpless on the sheets. He managed to work a hand between them, wrap it around his cock and holy shit that felt amazing, every nerve was on fire and before he even was aware he was close, he was coming. Hard. His vision went white and he just clung desperately to Wufei, pressing his hips up to the thrusts as he tightened around the thick length inside him, his erection pulsing thickly over his stomach.

The sound Wufei made was nearly inhuman, and he kept pressing, long, deep, hard thrusts until he was jerking and hiccuping over him. Duo could feel every twitch, the heat inside him, and groaned long, and low, as over-sensitised glands were brushed one last time, and Wufei rolled over to flop on the bed beside him.

He managed to reach out and grab Wufei’s hand, linking their fingers together on the bedspread as they stared up at the ceiling, chests heaving, feeling the sweat cool on their bodies.

“It’s a good job we won’t have time to do that too often,” he wheezed finally. “I don’t think I can take it.”

*

The next time Hilde came to visit, it was for Duo’s birthday, Halloween.

For the first time since he had claimed the date following the war, he wasn’t having having a huge party, a big night out with costumes and drinking. Instead, everyone was gathering at his and Wufei’s house for another dinner.

The only person in costume was Liangyu, dressed as a Jack o’Lantern, and evidently not entirely sure how she felt about it.

“It’s undignified,” Wufei protested, as Duo replaced the little green sprout hat she kept pulling off.

“I change her diapers, the kid’s got no dignity anyway,” Duo said cheerfully, smiling at the baby
and getting a gummy grin in response. He headed back to the kitchen, leaving Liangyu propped up on the deep corner of the sofa next to Relena. As soon as he had been removed from Liangyu’s span of attention, the grin disappeared, she turned her head to peer curiously at Relena, and her little fat hands found their way up to her head to remove the hat once more. She squished it consideringly in her fingers, and then was raising it to her mouth to chew on when Relena darted in and deftly relieved her of it, tossing it to Wufei.

On Hilde’s last visit, the house had been peaceful, reverent and slightly awed with the arrival of this new person. Now, it was warmer, less cautious, noisy and bright. There was a large play mat on the floor beside the sofa, with various blocks, cups and other colourful toys, as well as a number of books on a small shelf.

Where before had been two lives awkwardly unpacked into one room, there seemed to be cohesion, a flow to the house established from a family living there, learning what was practical, and adjusting as necessary.

Of course, that wasn’t her pressing concern, so when she saw Duo slip out onto the patio, she followed close behind, determined to corner him once and for all.

She was a little surprised to find him expecting her, and holding out a glass of wine to her with an awkward grin. She was even more surprised when Wufei followed out behind her, closing the door quietly, and moving to stand beside Duo, watching her with a small smirk.

“Uh…” she said.

“I told him,” Duo said. “So you can leave my testicles alone.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, however,” Wufei told her. “I know you’re more Duo’s friend than mine, so your concern is touching.”

Belatedly, she took the glass of wine and had a long sip, feeling the warmth curl through her against the cool evening air. As she drank, she studied the two of them. There was nothing that much changed with their interactions, save that they stood that slight bit closer, angled a tiny bit more towards each other. Perhaps a bit more gentleness.

“You’re playing it pretty cool,” she said dryly.

“Well it’d be pretty uncomfortable for everyone else if we didn’t,” Duo said, rolling his eyes.

“Would you feel better if I said we were obnoxious when we were alone?” Wufei asked.

“Do they even know?”

Duo snorted, and they shared a look, that brief, wordless communication conveying everything that Hilde hadn’t been sure about.

“Quatre knows,” Duo said eventually, gesturing loosely at his chest. “Which means Heero knows.”

“Which means Trowa knows,” Wufei added. “And probably Sally, since she’s always in with those two gossipy old women.”

“And Relena’s never out of the loop for very long.”

“We didn’t want to make it a big deal,” Wufei explained. “Nothing has really changed. We are as
“we ever were.”

“Just with more fun sleepin’ arrangements!”

Hilde choked on her wine at that, and Wufei shot an exasperated look at Duo, who was grinning unabashedly. He sipped his own wine, now free hand stuffed casually into his pocket, and chuckled to himself. He was relaxed and happy, and even despite the expression Wufei was pulling, his body language spoke of the same – contentment, peace. Catching her breath, trying not to cough wine down herself, Hilde glowered at Duo, and he waggled his eyebrows in response.

“Think of it as revenge for last time,” he told her, and then winked as he brushed past her to head back inside. “Come on, I’m starvin’.”

Returning inside from the cool, dark night, Hilde was briefly dazzled by the warm lights in the house, and closed the door behind her, taking a moment for her sight to adjust. Her skin prickled from the change in temperature, and the bustle and laughter of the others.

This was a home, she thought, moving to take a seat at the table and watching as the others came to join her. Liangyu was scooped up by Duo and dropped into a high chair beside his seat with a kiss on the top of her head, then Wufei swept in as he moved away to deftly fasten a bib around her neck and set a plate of soft garlic bread in front of her. The actions were slick, thoughtless, instinctual - teamwork which had made them so efficient as partners in the Preventers easily transferring to this domesticity.

It suited them.

“Did you manage to get your lease renewed, Trowa?” Relena asked, sliding into the seat across the table from him, taking the bowl of salad off Wufei and dishing some onto her plate.

“No,” Trowa said casually, passing spaghetti down the table to Quatre, as Duo brought the bolognaise over. “I decided not to in the end, somewhere better came up.”

“Better?”

Trowa was spared from answering immediately as bowls and drinks and plates were scooted around to whoever needed them. It was a few minutes later before anyone followed up.

“Where are you moving to, then?” Hilde prompted.

“Already moved, actually,” Trowa told them. “Last of the stuff went over this morning.”

“That was quick!” Quatre laughed. “Didn't you want any help?”

“Most of his stuff was already there, so it didn't take long,” Sally said dryly, liberally sprinkling parmesan over her dinner.

There was a long pause, and glances shared around the table, as Sally and Trowa tucked into their spaghetti, unconcerned.

“Did you help?” Relena asked Sally. “What's his new place like? Is it an improvement on that basement he was squatting in?”

“It was a very defensible position,” Trowa argued.

“That's not how normal people assess real estate.”
“If there is a single normal person in this room, please can they identify themselves immediately?”

“I think it’s an improvement,” Sally said, raising her voice over Trowa and Quatre’s bickering, “but as the owner, I’m probably biased.”

“I didn’t know you’d got another place to rent out,” Wufei said, looking interested. “What prompted that?”

“Nothing. I haven’t got another place. Pass the garlic bread?”

“Oh.” More puzzled looks, as Heero obediently passed the plate to Sally. “Then why…?”

“Seemed like it would save time, since he was already over most nights anyway.”

The giveaway came when Quatre suddenly started laughing, startled and delighted.

“I knew it!” he cried, looking thoroughly pleased with himself. “I knew it, but you weren’t giving anything away, were you?”

“It was probably well past time,” Trowa allowed, shooting Sally a small smirk and getting a wink in return. “Since everyone else was starting to behave like grown ups, we had to step up.”

Heero grunted in acknowledgment, and gestured with his fork at Sally.

“Don’t think this means you can start stealing my stationery instead,” he told her sternly. “My post-it notes are off limits.”

“Noted,” Sally agreed.

It was a bizarre and dysfunctional family, Hilde thought, hiding her grin behind her glass, and watching the bickering and teasing continue. By any stretch of the imagination, it wasn't what anyone would design, but it worked.

At the far end of the table, watching Duo and Wufei grin at each other over their daughter's head, whilst the baby made happy burbling sounds as she gummed her food to death, Hilde felt a knot of anxiety that had been weighing her down since she heard about this marriage loosen and dissipate. Even as she felt a little sad knowing that she wouldn't see Duo so much any more. She wouldn't be needed in the same way.

Her friend was in the perfect place. And in the end, that was all that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

THE END. Except not for this universe, because I have many many ideas relating to this ridiculous story. Thanks to tumbledrylemur for the request that has taken over my life, thanks to kangofu_cb for the encouragement, enabling and beta reading, and to everyone who is reading and reviewing. <3 I appreciate you all indulging my ridiculous endeavours.

ALSO cosmic-era on tumblr drew the most gorgeous piece of art to go with this fic, I love it and can't stop staring at it, and you can see it here: http://rara-
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!