May Demons Rest: Shinigami Sleeps 2017

by The Manwell (Manniness)

Summary

A re-write of my 2004 fanfic "Shinigami Sleeps"

To find and free Duo from his demons, Trowa leaves his uneventful life at the circus for the mean streets of an obscure colony in L2.

Notes

The original version of Shinigami Sleeps is available at several other websites (see below).
https://www.fanfiction.net/s/1964868/1/Shinigami-Sleeps-A-Duo-and-Trowa-Story
http://leftwing.inherentdarkness.net/fanfic/ss.html
http://www.raygunworks.net/2x3x2.html

What I’m posting here on AO3 is a rewritten version completed in 2017. This story has been haunting me, waiting patiently for me to apply the writing lessons I’ve learned since having finished the original. This dear child of mine deserves so much more care and skill than I’d been capable of giving it back in 2004.

If you loved the teenage angst and innocence of the original Shinigami Sleeps, you may not like the re-write, which I fondly think of as “Shinigami Sleeps, the Innocence Lost Version.” Seriously. This fic is heavy.
Since we all know my ownership of Gundam Wing is no more than a delusional fantasy, I'll skip the disclaimer bit. If I gain anything from this fiction, it will be satisfaction at having written it and, reviewers willing, joy at having shared it with others.

WARNINGS: swearing, animal butchery (for meat), drug use and withdrawal, suicidal thoughts/planning, street violence, gang violence, reference to human trafficking and sex trafficking, underage drinking, reference to childhood encounters with sexual predators (no NCS but there are some very close calls), slash (male/male) sexual situations, reference to Dom/sub (brief, but it's there), (vague) reference to cannibalism

Total word count: 150,000 (an average of 3000-4000 words per chapter)
I walk toward the designated safe house, my thoughts barely discernible above my exhaustion. The mission had been... difficult. Backup would have been welcome. But that does not matter now. The mission objectives have been completed and the targets eliminated. Although it had been a challenge, I'd managed to stay on schedule. And now I've arrived at my destination. I look forward to a brief sojourn at this old, abandoned farmhouse where I can rest. Relax. And wait.

The door opens slowly and I reach for my gun. I'm aware that someone will be meeting me here, probably one of the other pilots. Still, it would be the height of stupidity for me to let my guard down now, so close to the promised refuge.

"Trowa?"

My hand drops back to my side, gun still tucked away. "Quatre."

The young man offers me a smile and it seems twice as brilliant as the last time I'd seen him. I suppose memories really do fade. I inquire, "How have you been?"

"Fine. Fine. And you, Trowa?"

I nod.

"You look exhausted."

I blink and take a moment to study my acquaintance more closely. "You as well," I observe.

Quatre offers a rueful smile in reply.

"What is it?" I ask.

His frown is one of thought and concern. "It's Duo. He was supposed to show up four days ago."

I don't ask him if he's been monitoring the emergency frequencies or our enemy's communications. I simply look at him. He somehow knows what I would say.

Quatre shakes his head. "Nothing. I can't find anything on where he might be."

"He'll show up."
Quatre doesn’t look convinced. “After you get some rest, would you mind…?”

I nod. “I’ll help you look for him.”

I spend two days scouring the air waves and hacking into communication satellites but there’s no sign of Duo. I watch Quatre’s smile diminish with every dead end we encounter. I can clearly sense Quatre’s acute worry but can think of nothing of substance to offer him by way of encouragement.

Approximately seventy-two hours after my arrival, I am settling into bed at some insanely late hour—had just closed my eyes—when I hear it: the door opening and Quatre’s shout. I throw myself off of the musty cot and rush to the front of the house in time to see Quatre gathering a limp form into his arms.

“Duo? Duo! Are you all right? Duo!”

And it is Duo. Unconscious but apparently otherwise uninjured. I kneel down beside Quatre and offer my assistance. Between the two of us, we manage to maneuver Duo Maxwell into the house and into the nearest room, which happens to be mine.

Sometime later, I’m standing in the doorway, watching Quatre’s unsuccessful attempts to persuade our unconscious comrade to take a sip of water. The liquid trickles out of the corner of Duo’s mouth and Quatre sighs, putting a wealth of concern and frustration into that one breath.

It’s been over ten hours. No response from Duo. I step into the room holding the cup of broth I’d just heated up. I place the soup on the bedside table and gently remove the cup of water from Quatre’s fingers.

“Sit behind him,” I direct. “Hold him up.” Cup of water and spoon in one hand, I sink down onto the bed as well. Quatre does as I suggest and the two of us begin the slow process of re-hydrating him. I carefully spoon the water into his mouth until he swallows reflexively. It takes most of the afternoon but the two of us manage to get both the water and the soup into him.

Task accomplished, I have no real reason to stay. Quatre will look after Duo. But then, when I should have gotten up and returned the few dishes we’d used to the kitchen, I don’t. I set them down by my feet and look over my shoulder at the picture the two of them make on my bed as Duo sleeps leaning into Quatre’s chest. I stare at the hand Quatre holds against the crown of Duo’s head, pressing our unconscious comrade back against his shoulder. The other hand rests on Duo’s limp fingers. I stare. And I... feel. I...

“Trowa?”

I’d never... realized... before this moment.

I look up and into Quatre’s eyes. I see the realization in his gaze. He’s caught me. I have no words to express what can only be felt. Slowly, my hand reaches out to his. I settle my palm over Quatre’s hand and, consequently, Duo’s beneath it. I am not sure if my meager attempt at reassurance is successful.

Quatre diverts his gaze to Duo.

As do I.

I reach out to Duo with my free hand, trailing my fingertips gently over his cheek and jaw. I do not know if he can feel it; he remains unconscious. And then I hear myself, in a voice only I am aware of, whispering to him. To Duo.
I whisper that I want him to wake up. I want him to see what’s in my eyes because I cannot say this. I cannot find words to describe this emotion that I cannot ignore. For him.

**Duo.**

Shinigami Sleeps THE DREAM by TheManwell

... TROWA ...

**I blink** open my eyes and frown up at the ceiling, remembering. Had I been dreaming? No, couldn’t be. My dreams are dark, violent, bloody. For a long moment, my confusion paralyzes me. Only my eyes move. My gaze roves around the room. I’m in a trailer. At the circus. Not on assignment.

But the war—is it—?

I pull in a shaky breath and I don’t release it until I spot the calendar hanging on the opposite wall. Even in the dim light I can see the date: February, A.C. 198.

The war is over.

So I **had** been dreaming.

I close my eyes once again.

I don’t have to get up yet. I could manage twenty more minutes of sleep. I can sleep anywhere, almost anytime. A hold-over from a childhood spent loading ammo clips between battles, banging around on damaged sections of plating—the acidic scent of flux, the spark and crackle of a welding
torch, tiny cuts on my fingers from splicing wires—

With a jerk of my chin, I turn my thoughts away from those times. All those meaningless battles. Meaningless because they’d provided me with a meal and clothing and a safe place to sleep and nothing more. And what had I been? Who? Nobody. A nameless boy soldier.

A nameless boy who’s become a man with a stolen name.

If I didn’t have a place to call home, I’d be a heartless shadow.

I sit up and twist around to perch on the edge of the bunk. Rub my hands briskly over my face. I’m surprised to find the crust of dried tears on my skin. The trailer floor is cold against my bare feet. Grounding. I pull on my jeans and a sweater and head outside. I’m barefoot, but it doesn’t bother me.

The dream I’d just had, though… that bothers me.

It’s odd that I’d dreamed of the past, of the time when I’d fought in the war with the others, but the actual events that I’d experienced in the dream had never really happened.

And the overwhelming emotion I’d felt...

Well. That had happened. Once. But that hardly matters. It had only been a moment. A soldier’s delusion after having defied death a number of times only to face it — _him_ — one more time.

Still, I’ve never had a dream like this one.

I wander over to the animal cages. The lions will be hungry. It’s not my turn to feed them today, but Grigori won’t mind. He’ll see me and grunt something in Romany then get on with his day. As usual.

That’s the ironic thing about circus life. It seems so strange and magical to those on the outside, but to us, it’s just another routine.

Just like this one. The lions watch me as I catch and butcher their breakfast. It’s cheaper in the long run to breed our own rabbits and chickens than to invest in a freezer, stock it, haul it from place to place, and provide power for it. The last is especially bothersome as the ancient generators are constantly on the fritz. And relying on local markets to supply food at a reasonable price that won’t make the animals sick is just asinine. Especially in the colonies.

Grigori looks in just as I finish up. He takes the bucket of innards and walks out. He’ll fry them up for the bear. She’s Grigori’s baby and I’ve never tried to get her to do more than tolerate me.

The lions eat. I stare at the blood on my hands.


That’s my life. I’ve accepted it.

But last night’s dream…

My mind buzzes with questions. Why hadn’t my dream been filled with screams and blood and ammunition explosions like so many others? Faces of dead men and women. Sometimes children. I can never remember their names, even when I recognize them. In my dreams, it doesn’t matter. In
my nightmares, I don’t care.

But this last dream is different.

Why, of all times, would I dream of that emotion now?

That question is, perhaps, the most perplexing.

And I have absolutely no theory to satisfy it.

It’s easier to contemplate another: why had I felt… whatever I’d felt… toward Duo?

Of all the Gundam pilots, I know Duo the least. Not for lack of time spent together. Aboard Peace Million, I’d practically been his shadow. Or he had been mine.

I remember our first meeting at the New Edwards Base and, unbelievably, the corners of my mouth tilt up. I think I’m smiling. Smiling because I’d been trying to help Heero and Duo — the enemy had been moving in to flank them — and what thanks had I gotten? Duo, in his hellishly black, scythe-swinging mobile suit, had charged me head-on.

Among mercenaries, I’d seen many a-friendship begin with a brawl.

But we hadn’t become friends then, Duo and I. I’d infiltrated OZ; I’d destroyed Duo’s beloved Deathscythe; I’d gut punched him to pass him the data projector containing his rebuilt suit’s schematics. No, Duo and I had not been friends then. Comrades? Perhaps.

But then a year later, having infiltrated Dekim Barton’s forces, I’d locked Duo up in a detention cell on X18999. I’d gotten on with prepping a shuttle for departure. He’d shown up, thanked me for hanging around, and something in his cocky grin had made me say, “I wasn’t waiting for you.”

Why hadn’t he punched me?

Had he thought I was joking?

Or had he figured that I’d trusted him to be on time?

Or, failing that, to find his own way off the doomed colony?

It’s too late to ask.

I still ask myself why I’d said it. I still pretend I don’t know the answer.

The dream. Is it unfinished business? Regret, perhaps?

Or there’s a far simpler explanation: the most recent moment we had shared had been when Duo, Quatre, and I had destroyed our Gundams together after the battle against Dekim Barton’s forces.

I pause.

The last time I’d seen any of the pilots had been then. And I’d been with Duo and Quatre. Surely, this explains the dream.

I tell myself to simply forget about it.

The blood on my hands is starting to get tacky. There are droplets on my bare feet. I head for the communal shower, which is really just a spigot rigged to a small water heater surrounded by a flimsy
plastic curtain in the kitchen car. I rinse off the blood, undress, and wash up quickly. Redress in my jeans and sweater. I roll up my T-shirt and underwear, tucking them under my arm, and trek back to my trailer to finish getting ready for the day. I’ve been putting on muscle and I’ve grown another inch. Cathy needs to let out the waist in my costume.

I get dressed. My hair dries as I drink two cups of coffee in the mess tent. Cathy finds me. She sets her sewing kit down on the table with a meaningful *thunk!*

I sigh.

It’s not until I’m modeling my ridiculously poofy clown pants — right in the middle of the yard because of course the light’s better out here where everyone can damn well see — that it hits me.

The most important memory I have of Duo slams into me as a cool breeze plays across my bare arms. Goose bumps pebble my skin and my shoulders burn with the memory of the heat and weight of Duo’s hands. The strength of his grip.

He’d found me. After I’d lost my memory — when I’d been little more than a robot boy simply doing as I was told, letting Cathy take care of me, trying to ignore the panic and the endless chill of outer space that roamed the edge of my every thought — Duo had found me.

He’d reached out. He’d touched me firmly, shaken me gently. He’d remembered me when I hadn’t been able to remember *myself*. He’d shown me that I did have a past and it was out there.

When Duo had realized he wasn’t welcome, he hadn’t tried to force his way deeper into my life. He’d retreated. He’d told Quatre and Quatre had come, but the enemy had followed. It had been then that I’d begun to remember. That I’d started to become strong enough to fight back against the fear.

If not for Duo, I wouldn’t have been ready to face the war.

Duo had given that to me. Enabled me. Empowered me.

I scan the fluttering tents and dented trailers. The grimy trucks. I see Boris heading for the mess tent. These people — and maybe me, too — are we alive because Duo had bullied his way backstage, grabbed my shoulders and looked at me — *seen* me — in the shadows?

It’s ironic because in all the time I’d spent with him, I’d never once seen as deeply into him. Quatre, Wufei, Heero — I know what makes them tick. But Duo? What had driven his braggadocio? His rage? Sure, he may have seemed the most expressive and opinionated of the five of us. But who is he?

Sometimes, I fool myself into thinking I know.

But I don’t. No matter how many times I dissect the past.

I cast my gaze around me and consider my home. I consider the fact that I *have* a home all because Duo had suited up in Deathscythe and blindly followed me to C-241, where rogue OZ troops had been holding the entire circus, including Cathy, and all of the colony civilians hostage. I hadn’t asked for his help — I hadn’t asked for anyone’s help — but he’d backed me up. So had Quatre.

And a good thing, too.

Duo had stealthed his way inside the colony. He’d taken down every enemy Taurus suit and
ordered the shot-callers to surrender. He’d done all that while I’d been using the Zero System — or, more accurately, letting it use me — to defeat the troops space-side until I’d been fighting in a berserker’s frenzy. Quatre’s timely intervention had stopped me from firing upon an enemy suit and blasting a hole through the colony directly behind it.

My memory had returned then and it had startled me that I’d shared so few moments with Duo. Certainly nothing that would warrant him following me into battle. I’d understood why Quatre had come after me: he’d tried to talk me down just as I’d tried to reach out to him when he’d been trapped in Zero’s thrall. But Duo hadn’t been there for the purpose of watching Quatre’s back. Or even mine. He’d gone on ahead to protect the colonists. Cutting directly to the source, as they say.

It doesn’t matter if Duo had made his way into the colony for my sake or the sake of the people there. Regardless, his immediate presence had saved the citizens of the colony and, by default, the people I’d most needed to protect. The manager had been struck by a soldier before our arrival, but none of the other innocent bystanders had been hurt.

All because of Duo.

I still owe him thanks for that. At the very least.

“What are you thinking about so hard?” Cathy asks as she fusses with the suspenders on my costume. These will have to be lengthened, too.

“Duo,” I say, and then I surprise myself by adding, “I think I’ll give him a call.”

“That’ll be nice,” she agrees. “I made a bit of a mess in the communications trailer yesterday. Let me get that cleaned up and then it’s all yours.”

I nod.

I think about that damn dream again.

I consider calling Duo. Just to say hello. Is that what I’m supposed to do?

I squint up at the clear, blue sky. A waning gibbous moon stares back at me. Since when do any of my dreams require an explanation?

They don’t. I already know why I dream what I do: regret, hopelessness, helplessness, anger, fear.

I acknowledge them and move on.

Or do I?

Maybe I’m deluding myself. Maybe it’s always going to be this way.

Heero had told me once to follow my emotions.

This might be the first time I’ve taken his advice as he’d meant it.

I will call Duo.

During the final battle, Duo had had my back on Libra, had crossed my path right when I, for Quatre’s sake, had needed him the most.

The dream — the image of Duo, unconscious and helpless without an apparent cause — calls to me. Makes me wonder who has his back now.
It haunts me.

Chapter End Notes

Unless I specifically tell you otherwise, any and all references to past dialog or actions are taken directly from pre-series (Episode Zero), the series itself, or Endless Waltz.

The emotion Trowa feels in the dream has a basis in the series, Episode 48. As Duo and Trowa pass each other aboard Libra, they have a moment where they wish for each other’s survival but don’t actually say it aloud:

Duo thinks: Don’t go getting yourself killed. (Subtitles: Don’t get yourself killed.)
Trowa thinks: Take care, Duo. (Subtitles: You either, Duo.)

Daytime moons are lovely. After a full moon, you can see a waning gibbous or last quarter moon in the morning. (Before a full moon, you can see a waxing gibbous or first quarter moon in the afternoon.)
Calls and Calling

Chapter Notes

Music rec: “Unknown Soldier” by Breaking Benjamin
(I like this because it’s vaguely apathetic, for one. But also because Trowa is in the process of choosing to leave his hum-drum life behind. He’s seeing Duo’s situation in terms of “black and white” and it becomes impossible for Trowa to talk himself out of letting things slide.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... TROWA ...

“Hello, Quatre. I apologize if my call is coming at a bad time.”

The young man on the vid screen smiles with delight. “Trowa! It’s great to hear from you! No, this isn’t a bad time at all! How are you?”

“Fine,” I reply. “And you?”

“Great.” He sighs happily. “I’m really glad you called. I should have been keeping in touch...”

“You’re very busy.”

He doesn’t deny it. “Are you still with the circus?”

I nod.

“How is Cathy?”

“She’s doing well.”

“That’s good to hear.”

I take a breath. “Have you heard from the others?”

Quatre nods. “Yes, let’s see... Wufei is with the Preventers now, working with Sally Po. Duo’s running a salvage yard with a friend of his in the L2 area. But I haven’t heard from Heero.” He looks at me hopefully.

I shake my head. “I haven’t heard from him, either. But I’m sure he’s around.”

Quatre agrees. “So, um, why the call, Trowa? I mean, is there anything I can do? You haven’t heard about any trouble...?”

“No, nothing like that. We said we’d stay in touch and it’s been over a year. I was just curious.”

Quatre smiles. “Do you have my email address?”

“Yes.”
“If you know the circus’s schedule, could you send it to me? Maybe our paths will cross again in the future.”

“It would be nice to see you again.”

“I’ve missed you, Trowa.”

“It’s been a while.” I pause. “I’ll send you our schedule.”

“Thanks.” Quatre’s brow furrows as I hesitate. “What is it?”

“I was wondering. When exactly did you last hear from Wufei and Duo?”

… TROWA …

“Chang Wufei speaking.”

“Wufei, it’s Trowa. Are you free to talk?”

Wufei looks up from the mound of paperwork on his desk and at the vid screen. “Ah, hello. It’s been a long time. How have you been, Barton?”

“Fine. Yourself?”

Wufei’s lips pull into a slight smirk. “I can distantly recall a time when I had nothing to do.”

“They just want to keep you from starting any trouble,” I reply daringly. We both know he’d caused plenty of trouble just after the war. With Dekim Barton’s blessing.

When Wufei chuckles, I realize that enough time must have passed to allow for light banter. If there’d been casualties during the attempted coup d’état, however, no amount of time would have made those events amusing.

He concurs, “I think you might be correct in that.”

“I don’t mean to take up too much of your time, so I’ll get to the point.”

Wufei nods, appreciating the gesture.

“Have you heard from the others?”

“Quatre and I spoke on New Year’s.”

“No one else?”

Wufei shakes his head. “Is something wrong?”

“No. I was just wondering.” I hesitate.

“About what, Barton?”

I consider my next words carefully. “I heard Duo was in the L2 area, running a salvage yard with a friend. Do you know anything about that?”

Wufei shakes his head. “No. Who told you that?”

I make no comment as he turns to his computer, typing rapidly, but it’s clear that the news has
unsettled him. If for no other reason than the possibility of Duo’s Preventers file being out-of-date.

Instead, I say, “Quatre told me. Apparently, they spoke about six months ago.”

Eyes narrowed in speculation, Wufei turns his attention back to the vid screen and inquires, “Do you think something has happened to him?”

“I’m not sure. Do you remember the girl who brought Duo information on Libra? Right before the last battle?”

“Yes.”

“Her name is Hilde Schbeiker. The salvage and scrap yard was owned by her family until a few months ago.”

Wufei arches a brow in silent question.

“It’s been sold.” A fact I’d learned when I’d placed an inter-space call there not an hour ago and spoken with the smug, new owner.

After disconnecting the call, I’d immediately forced the dated communications system to interface with the L2 Intranet and waited as it had wheezed and grunted through an excruciatingly slow scan of official resident records. Five minutes had turned into ten… then fifteen… and twenty. After thirty-six minutes, my patience had snapped.

I’d canceled the search and dialed the second phone number that Quatre had given me. I would have gone to the nearest Internet cafe if the closest establishment hadn’t been a two-hour drive away through winding dirt roads. Plus the thirty minutes it would take me to look over whichever vehicle I was interested in “borrowing.”

The soldier in me had itched for action, but if I blindly jumped behind the wheel and hot-wired one of the trucks, I might end up stranded on the side of the road with a useless, smoking hunk of semi-melted machinery… that I would have to repair or replace myself. By the time I’d gone the rest of the way on foot, the cafe would be closed for the day. So, either way, I’d be stuck and waiting for Cathy to come rescue me. Too risky. Too time-consuming.

While I hadn’t relished the prospect of placing a call to someone in Une’s network, it had been undeniably faster to simply call a Preventer agent. Luckily, I’m acquainted with one. And he owes me. A couple of times over.

“Wufei, I’m calling in a favor.”


“With the Preventers resources at your disposal, you’ll be able to locate Hilde Schbeiker.”

Wufei frowns. “Are you looking for Maxwell or this woman?”

I tell him, “I’m looking for Duo. Hilde might know where he is.”

“I could save you the trouble and simply find Maxwell.”

One corner of my mouth lifts into something that might even be a smile. “By now, you should know that nothing is ‘simple’ when it involves Duo Maxwell.”

... TROWA ...
I disconnect the call and stare down at the scrap of paper I’d jotted the number on. It had taken Wufei less than a day to locate Hilde Schbeiker. And although he hadn’t said anything, I suspect he’s also looking for Duo. It’s not that I doubt Wufei’s abilities or the Preventers resources. It’s that Duo is excellent at anonymity. And while I appreciate Wufei’s efforts, I doubt they will reveal Duo’s location. Where normal people leave paper trails in their wake, Duo leaves friends. If I manage to locate Duo, it will be by word-of-mouth rather than electronic records.

I consider the series of numbers on the notebook page and take a moment to wonder at my own actions. If I allow myself to think about it, what I’m doing is ridiculous. Am I really trying to locate Duo Maxwell because of a dream I’d had about him? Why can’t I let this go? I have no reason to suspect that anything is even wrong. What am I going to say when I dial Hilde’s number and she tells me to hold a moment and, ten seconds later, I find myself face-to-face with Duo?

I pull my hands away from the vid phone. I need an excuse. A few moments later, I have a selection to choose from. I’m ready.

I check the clock, calculate the time difference, and then I dial the number. After a few seconds, it connects.

“Hello?”

“Hello. Is this Hilde Schbeiker?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Trowa Barton. I knew Duo in the war—”

“Yes, of course. He spoke of you often.”

I gawk at the friendly girl on the screen. But, more telling than that unexpected revelation is the fact that she’d spoken of Duo in the past tense. I make an assumption and ask, “Have you heard from him?”

“Not since the business went under. What’s up?”

I shrug. “Nothing urgent. I’ve just lost touch with him. Any idea where I might reach him?”

She hums thoughtfully. “He told me he was thinking about meeting up with an old friend... Howard, I think his name was.”

“The Sweepers?” I guess.

“That’s it!” she says.

“Thank you, Hilde. I’ll try there.” After mourning the valiant loss of the *Peace Million*, Howard had more or less forced his contact information on me — “For emergencies, yeah there, Trowa?” — before we’d all gone our separate ways.

Hilde implores, “If you find Duo, will you tell him ‘hello’ for me?”

“Certainly.” My finger hovers over the disconnect button. “When was the last time you heard from him?”

“Right before we walked away from the yard. God, that must have been... last December. I tried to get him to stick around for Christmas but he was all geared up for his trip to Earth to see Howard.”
I nod. “If he happens to call you, would you mind—”

“No worries, Trowa. I’ll let him know you were looking for him.”

“Thank you.” I close the communication and dial the number that Howard had bullied me into committing to memory.

... HOWARD ...

“Yo! Howard!”

The older man mutters as he pulls himself out of the engine. “What is it?”

The mechanic hovering in the office doorway shouts back, “Some guy on the vid looking for Duo!”

Howard sighs. “That kid is more trouble than he’s worth,” he grumbles with a frown. Still, his heart isn’t in the words. Sure, Duo’s got problems, but who doesn’t? The older man shakes his head and snatches a rag from the tool box nearby. He calls out, “I’ll be right in!”

Scrubbing the dirt and grease from his hands, Howard makes his way across the mechanic bay. When he enters the office, the fellow mechanic grabs some manuals and heads out the door, leaving Howard to deal with the caller in private. He closes the door, blocking out the clatter from the engineering hold beyond and slides into the chair behind the vid.

“This is Howard. How d’you think I can help you?”

“Hello. This is Trowa Barton. Do you remember me from—”

“Peace Million! Sure, Trowa. How’s it going?”

“All right. You?”

“Could be worse, I suppose. You looking for Duo?”

“Yeah.”

“Anything the matter?”

“No. Not really. I just haven’t heard from him in a while.”

“Hm. Well, you’re a little late, Trowa.”

“How late?”

Howard replies, “Just gone ten days.”

“Did he say where he was heading?”

“Not specifically. Just that he was going to visit an old friend.” Howard shifts in his chair, wondering how much more he should say.

“What else?” Trowa is quick to ask.

“Well... It’s just that he hadn’t been sleeping well. Nightmares. Woke up a couple of guys in the rooms on either side of his. Looked like crap before he took off.” Howard sighs. “I tried to convince him to see somebody about it, but he said there was only one guy who’d understand.”
“And he didn’t mention a name.”

“Not exactly, but I’ve got a good guess.”

“Go ahead.”

“Well, I’d have to say that’d be Heero Yuy.” At Trowa’s mildly curious expression, Howard continues, “He was the only one Duo ever brought back here during the war.” He shakes his head. “Then the kid used the parts from Deathscythe to get his own Gundam up and running overnight.” Howard chuckles. “Oddly enough, Duo wasn’t all that upset about it. Maybe it’s just an old man’s intuition, but I’d say Duo’s gone to find Heero.”

“I see. Do you know where Duo might have gone to look for him?”

“Well, I can’t say that I know who calls it home-sweet-home, but I took a gander at an address he was thinkin’ real hard over. You want it?”

Trowa nods. “Please.”

Howard recites it from memory. Hell, he doesn’t keep these manuals around for his own reference, but not everyone’s got a knack for storing bits of coding in their brain. Service numbers, GPS coordinates, colony call signs… after all that, one little address is easy.

Howard watches Trowa’s shoulders tense as he quickly scribbles the information down, wondering about the urgency. It prompts him to say, “Sorry I didn’t see a phone number.” Or Howard would have called already to check in on the kid. Maybe he should do that anyway. Look up that address and figure out who it belongs to. Duo can bitch him out later for butting in. Howard is suddenly very tired of pretending to look the other way just because Duo’s reached his majority.

“I’m a grown man, damn it. Back off, you old buzzard.”

“Sure, Duo. I’ll back off if you tell me what’s up.”

“So I’ve got problems. Who doesn’t? I can handle it.”

“Duo—”

“I’m not that scrawny kid cutting into the flight rations anymore, all right? If I need your nose in my business, I’ll send you an engraved invitation.”

Trowa’s voice jars Howard back into the present. “This should be enough. Thank you, Howard.”

“Hey, no problem. And if you find Duo, would you let him know that he’s still got a job waiting for him here?”

“Of course.”

The vid screen goes blank and Howard leans back in the grimy chair. He doesn’t like admitting it, but he’s worried. He’d never seen Duo look the way he had on the morning of his departure. And he wonders what, in this day and age of peace, could rattle the scrappy know-it-all so much. Nothing — not battles, enemy capture, or space travel — had ever gotten to that kid.

It only takes a few minutes to tap into the L1 database. The address is real enough. There’s even a phone number. With another search, Howard finds the corresponding website. A database search reveals only one mention of the name “Heero Yuy.”
“Hm. Seems like that Yuy boy might be stayin’ outta trouble after all.”

Duo, though, who knows. He sends a quick message attachment to the number Trowa had used to make his call, sharing the information even though Trowa has probably already found it all on his own. Still, doesn’t hurt to be thorough.

“Speaking of…” Howard squints at the clock and does the math. There’s no way a call will get through to anyone at that L1 address for hours. It’s night cycle, Saturday, there.

“Be faster to fly out.” The irony isn’t lost on him.

Howard sighs and pushes himself to his feet. He has business waiting for him in the next port. But as he opens the door, he glances at the dark vid screen.

“Good luck, Trowa,” he says. With the mood Duo had been in before he’d made landfall, God knows, Trowa is gonna need as much of it as he can get.

And patience. A whole fuck ton of it.

Duo might have forgotten the fact that he has friends — that there are people who care about his skinny ass — but he hasn’t unlearned his stubborn streak. Not in the slightest.

… TROWA …

“Are you sure?”

I nod, placing a second pair of jeans in the small duffel bag.

Cathy runs a hand through her hair, looking worried. “Will you—”

“I’ll keep in touch, Cathy.”

She sighs, expression wry. “Am I that obvious?”

I huff out a breath. It stirs my bangs.

She shakes her head at me. “Can you at least tell me why you’re doing this?”

I don’t know why I’m doing this. Folding two pairs of socks into the bag, I decline to comment.

Cathy continues, “I mean, can’t Quatre send someone? Isn’t Wufei working for the Preventers now? Couldn’t they—”

I halt my preparations. “Catherine.”

She holds still as I gently brush a lock of her hair back over her shoulder.

“I’m coming back.”

She swallows. Crosses her arms tightly. Grips the loose sleeves of her handmade sweater. “I—I know.”

“Good.”

Cathy’s gaze follows me as I turn back to my packing. “Can you—do you know how long you’ll be gone?”
My gaze, briefly, meets hers. “As long as it takes.”

She sighs heavily. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Then why not hope I find him soon?”

“Oh, trust me, I will.”

I frown at her. “What’s wrong? During the war I would take off and you weren’t this upset about it.” Though, at first, she hadn’t realized that I’d been leaving to take care of orders. Fighting. Completing missions like I’d been checking off items on a grocery list. Indifferent to the consequences. I’d been closer to death than failure.

She still doesn’t need to know that part of it.

With a shrug, Cathy does her best to joke, “I guess I’ve just gotten used to you hanging around.”

I stare at her.

Sobering, she confesses, “It seems like an unnecessary risk.”

I suppose I can understand that. It’s more logical than my own reasoning. This quest may have started with a dream, but having heard Howard’s words and seen the concern on the man’s face, I can’t ignore the possibility that something may, indeed, be wrong.

... TROWA ...

I hover on the threshold of the gymnasium, watching the game. My search for Duo has led me here: a Boys’ and Girls’ Center, one of the few in the L1 colony cluster. The basketball court is crowded with boys, five in jerseys and five in plain, white T-shirts, battling for the lead. I would not have been surprised to see Duo playing ball or, considering the age of the players, coaching. But it is not Duo that I see with a whistle around his neck.

It’s Heero.

Quietly, I sink into the nearest bleacher seat. I have little doubt that Heero knows I’m here. I glance briefly at the former pilot, taking in the still-messy dark hair, narrowed eyes, and crossed arms. I’d been a little surprised to discover Heero’s volunteer work with this colony’s youth center. Not that I hadn’t been surprised to find Heero’s place of employment to be a small mom-and-pop computer repair shop. In truth, I hadn’t really known what I’d been expecting.

The sound of the whistle rips through the gym, bringing the boys on the court to a halt. Breathing hard, they gather around their coach for a few words. And only a few. I listen to the familiar growl as Heero comments on the play. Each boy is assigned something to work on for next time before Heero dismisses them from practice.

The kids pound from the gym toward the snack bar in the cafeteria, leaving their uninvited observer and coach alone.

“Trowa.”

“Heero.”

“What brings you here?” Heero asks, taking a seat beside me.
I don’t see a point in delaying the inevitable, so I say, “Duo.”
Heero arches a brow. Perhaps he’d learned the gesture from Wufei. “You missed him.”
I ignore the double meaning in those words. “How long ago?”
“Six days.”
Damn it.
Heero checks his watch. “You eat yet?”
“No.”
“Let’s go. I know a place.”

... TROWA ...

“How’d you end up coaching at the youth center?”
Heero glances up from his plate. “That would be, indirectly, Duo’s fault.”
My eyebrows rise along with my curiosity.
“Something he said during the war,” Heero replies.
“You’ve got me really wondering now.”
Heero smirks. “He was joking around, being annoying. I had work to do. Told him to shut the hell up.”
I take a bite of my tasteless sandwich of freeze-dried daily special and glance up, urging Heero to continue the story.
“He came back at me. Said I was such an anti-social tight ass because I didn’t think anyone could possibly understand what my life was like.”
“And?”
“He was right. But then he said I couldn’t understand what anyone else’s life was like, either.”
Heero’s eyes sparkle at the memory. “Duo got right in my face. ‘You think you’re the only one that hasn’t got a past worth reminiscing? You gonna continue that fine tradition with the present, too?’”
My stomach churns. I reach for my napkin. “Harsh.”
“But true.” Heero shrugs, clearly admiring Duo for standing up to him. Something I had never done. “Got me thinking.”
“He’s had that effect on Quatre as well.”
“But not you.”
I look up at Heero. “I never really had the opportunity to...”
“Be Maxwell-psychoanalyzed?” Heero supplies dryly.
“I was going to say ‘have my ass chewed.’”

“Something like that.”

“Hm.” Heero takes a long sip of stale, refiltered water.

“So, how’d Duo react to your time spent with the ankle biters?”

Heero chokes on a cough of surprise. “They’re junior high school students. Hardly ankle biters.”

“And?”

With a short glare, Heero says, “He didn’t have anything to say.”

My eyebrows arch yet again.

“Duo had a lot on his mind.”

I don’t ask what had been on Duo’s mind. It’s important intel, but this is not the place. Instead, I ask, “He still have a lot on his mind?”

“I would assume so.”

My eyes narrow. “You didn’t think to try to help him out when he came by?”

Heero scowls. “I’ve been where Duo is. He’s the only one who can deal with it.”

No one is that perfect. Not even Heero Yuy. Sighing, I lean back in my chair. “Any idea where he might be ‘dealing with it’?”

“Maybe.” Heero reaches for the remains of his sandwich.

I drum my fingertips against the table. “Are you going to tell me? Or do I get to beat it out of you?”

When he smirks, I realize I’d said both questions aloud. “Since you asked so nicely,” he replies, “sure. I’ll tell you.”

Chapter End Notes

Throughout this story, any references to the time before or during the series (including Endless Waltz) are based on actual scenes or data. All/any inferences I make are, to the best of my 2x3-shipper ability, based on dialog and actions.

HOWEVER, though the moment with Duo that Heero describes is set at the beginning of the series, the dialog is of my own invention. As far as I know, Duo never annoyed Heero when he had work to do and Heero never told him to shut up (except, possibly, when Heero was trying to get Wing ready for battle aboard Howard’s ship and ended up stealing the parts he needed from Deathscythe to manage it). So the confrontation didn’t happen in the official series. (Though, I think it could have happened.)

Trowa’s comment about Duo giving Quatre something to think about could come from
several different points in the series, though I prefer the interaction between Duo and Quatre just before Duo tells Quatre that Trowa survived and is with the circus; Duo says something along the lines of “Nobody other than me should have to suffer.” I think hearing that would have given Quatre a lot to think about.

Duo’s comment to Howard about Duo having been "a scrawny kid cutting into the rations” refers to when Duo stowed away aboard Howard’s ship in Episode Zero, which is where Duo first met Professor G.

The favors that Wufei owes Trowa are: (1) Trowa created a distraction on the mobile suit carrier while Wufei went after Treize (the first time) and then Trowa got Wufei out of there and invited him back to the circus, and (2) I am assuming that Trowa didn’t “out” Wufei to Dekim Barton during Endless Waltz.

(Though, how Trowa had gotten himself into a mobile suit after that impressive and acrobatic assassination attempt on Dekim, I do not know. This is one of the many reasons why EW makes my brain hurt. Maybe Trowa was thrown in the brig, escaped, hijacked a MS, cleared the way for Heero and Duo, put Duo in the same escape-able cell, and then Trowa ditched his army uniform on the shuttle? I should fic this. Make sense of it. Finally. Or something. Anyway, it’s not relevant for this story.)

Unless my memory is really off, I believe nobody died (from or during the fighting) in Endless Waltz.

CHAPTER 2: CALLS AND CALLING
I didn't make very many changes to this chapter.

UP NEXT:
There's a lot of new prose as Trowa arrives on Duo's home colony and it's sink-or-swim!
Downtown Denizens

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: drug use

List of L2 slang and definitions on my LiveJournal here:
http://themanwell.livejournal.com/72487.html

Music recs: “Coming Up” by Ani DiFranco & “A Little Piece” by The Jezabels

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... TROWA ...

I pause just outside the colony spaceport entrance. I’ve never visited this particular post in the L2 sector before. Never had any reason to. There hadn’t been anything here to draw me during the war and the colony itself has been in a recession for years, so without the promise of payment or profit, the circus wouldn’t have come.

The air is surprisingly thin and cool. Utterly still. There isn’t a breeze to be felt. The filtration units inside the spaceport terminal itself had generated more movement. But I’m sure that’s not why the hair at the back of my neck is standing on end.

Due to the colony’s standard “wheel” design, I’m able to take a good, long look. Get my bearings insofar as I can.

The main street from the spaceport is lined with shops like on any other colony or Earth city. Quaint, middle class neighborhoods sidle along respectable side streets before giving way to a smattering of corporate office buildings and sprawling compounds that, given their fenced sporting fields, must be schools. I count a dozen visible, grand, gated estates along the curve of the colony. Ostentatious and prideful. Like jewels adorning a tiara. The wealthy lording their comforts over the rest of the colony from their “high ground.”

I spy a half dozen construction sites dotting the outskirts of the downtown area, proof of recent economic growth, but even I can see that it’s too little too late. Within three short blocks, the welcoming façade of the main thoroughfare crumbles into squalor.

To the right, what had once been well-maintained, clean neighborhoods and perhaps lush parks is now a grimy ruin climbing the curve of the colony like a soot stain. The commercial district, if it can be called that, appears to be little more than a collection of warehouses with offices on the top floor and guarded gates out front. Though the structures are hardly inviting, I glimpse uniformed officers patrolling the surrounding routes. Private security rather than police, if I had to guess.

I turn to the left. This half of the colony is worse. A loosely connected cluster of grime-encrusted, windowless factories squats like a squashed centerpiece. On Earth, smoke stacks would have been hissing and belching waste gas up into the sky. Here, the vacuum of space is used to draw out the unwanted manufacturing byproducts. That is perhaps the only positive thing that can be said for the
area. Countless poorly-maintained low-income apartment structures list dangerously, threatening to crash into neighboring buildings. If this colony’s weather controls had included an option for wind, I don’t doubt that half of them would have already collapsed.

Perhaps the artificial wind had been turned off intentionally for that very reason.

Scanning the entire colony, I sum it up with no small amount of disdain as a fat, diarrhetic peacock and its overflowing shithole. The bruised and battered slums glare defiantly at the gross display of wealth on the “hill.” The palatial community sneers patronizingly back. I can feel the resentment in the unmoving air. Smell it with every breath. The wounds of the war are nothing compared to the abyss which divides the Haves from the Have-nots here.

Just seeing this much, I feel a piece of the puzzle that is Duo Maxwell slide into place. I no longer wonder why Duo had followed me to C-241 and immediately confronted the OZ force that had dared to take the citizens hostage. I see the same power dynamic here. He’d grown up in the shadow of similar bullies.

I had severely underestimated the duality of Duo’s home colony. Though the Earth Sphere United Nation had denounced all borders and revised trade regulations to promote economic equality, it is clear that no such effect has been felt here.

Heero hadn’t told me a lot about this place, but he had mentioned this much: Duo’s home colony is administered by importers and exporters made wealthy thanks to an underpaid, over-taxed, and under-privileged class.

Under-privileged. The term hardly does justice to the dreary and hopeless, colorless and filthy streets that cling to the track of the colony like gangrene.

“Are you armed?” Heero had asked.

I’d told him I was. Of course.

“You have cash on you?” At my raised brow, he’d elaborated, “For the customs inspectors.”

I’d hidden most of my funds using techniques that I’d learned from fellow mercs. And a good thing I had. Half the contents of my pockets had disappeared in exchange for an inspection seal on my unopened duffel bag and unsearched person.

I’m still standing, scanning and analyzing and planning my next move when someone who could be a departing passenger—but isn’t—brushes past. I allow the momentum to push me forward, mindful of the fact that if I’d been carrying a wallet, it would have been long gone. Heero hadn’t been thrilled with me using the needle and thread from his first-aid kit to sew my money into the inside hem of my jeans pant legs and along the inner lining of my duffel.

“You owe me,” I’d reminded him.

He hadn’t objected, but he hadn’t stopped glaring, either.

I’d considered smiling, convinced that that’s what Duo would have done.

But if I had grown up in a place like this, I would have decked Heero for his stinginess.

My hand curls tighter around the wire-enforced strap of my duffel bag; no one will be cutting through the handle in a effort to relieve me of my possessions. Though I’m aware that the further I venture into the derelict areas, the more likely it is that the knife will be aimed at my back or my neck
rather than the duffel itself.

I need intel.

I could call Wufei to ask for whatever public data the Preventers have on this place, but I doubt it will be of much help. If I trust outdated or inaccurate information, it will only put me in more danger. The best defense I have now is my own wits and training.

With narrowed eyes, I discard the nearest vid phone booth, battered and vandalized with graffiti. Territorial markings layered one on top of another. Words that I don’t understand gouged into the metal.

During the war, Duo had never used the slang or dialect from his home colony. Not around me, at least. Jaw clenching, I accept the fact that I’m about to embark on a very sharp and dangerous learning curve.

One step in front of the other, I walk. I reconnoiter. Search for a dependable informant. The soldier in me pushes against my skin, but I hold him back. A military presence will only draw unwanted attention to me in a place like this.

The skin at the back of my neck is still tight, the fine hairs standing at attention. People are watching me. Though I can’t catch anyone staring, I can feel the gazes. Measuring. Weighing.

I oblige with a wince and a shrug of my shoulders, letting my chosen mask settle into place: I’m a tourist. A space-trekker. A guy whose wanderlust has unluckily led him to this colony. As I move, I let my mind wander. It will aid with the illusion. Sticking to the safety of the wide sidewalks, I systematically recall what little Heero had told me about Duo’s brief visit. And it had been very brief, indeed.

At first, Duo had merely seemed to be floundering in a world that was at peace, but there’d clearly been more to it than that. Duo’s first night camping out on Heero’s couch, he’d had a nightmare. A screaming-to-wake-the-dead-in-neighboring-colonies nightmare. Heero had been forced to hit him in order to wake him up. I can imagine the scene. Can picture Duo, gasping and shivering from the power of the vision that had been assaulting him. It’s not a difficult image to conjure; I’ve endured more than a few night terrors myself.

Then Heero had asked if Duo’d wanted to talk about it. Duo had refused. And Heero had told him that there was nothing to be done about the nightmares until Duo had faced the source of his fears.

The next day, Duo had left.

My hands fist tightly at the rush of irritation I feel toward Heero Yuy. Not all of the Gundam pilots had been trained so well, been given the appropriate psychological coping mechanisms or even tutored on the art of denial. While I’ve always admired Heero and I trust him with my life, it turns out there are at least some human nuances that he doesn’t seem to understand.

Of course Duo had left. He’d gone to Heero looking for help and had found none.

Not that Duo would have ever come right out and said as much. He shouldn’t have had to say anything at all. Heero’s advice had not been inaccurate or harsh, but advice could have been given over a vid call. Heero should have recognized Duo’s visit for the cry for help it had been.

Perhaps I’m assuming too much. Perhaps it’s not really that bad. Perhaps I’m letting my own experiences influence my assessment of the situation.
But then again...

Then again, just days after Duo had been denied a friendly shoulder to lean on, I’d been asleep on Earth, dreaming about him.

The dream still bothers me. Duo, silent and unconscious. Unresponsive and weak from an unexplained cause. My hand tightens around the strap of my duffel bag. The longer I investigate and the more information I uncover, the more unsettled I am. At this point, I’m not capable of convincing myself that everything is all right.

Still. How could one little, unsettling dream have been enough to put me on this path? Is this my true motivation for trying to find Duo?

Terrifyingly, I think it is.

One dream. An instant of emotion, a heartfelt wish in the heat of battle that I’ve been trying to forget for years: Take care, Duo…

I shake my head.

It couldn’t have been real—can’t be real now—could it? And yet here I am, after four non-stop days of asking questions and cramming my legs into the meager allowance provided by space economy class.

Is this what people call obsession? My neck feels warm. Heat flares under my arms and at the small of my back. I’m sweating in the cold air.

Hell. I’m embarrassed.

But the memory of the dream-Duo keeps me moving forward. I tell myself that I won’t impose. I’ll just find him and keep an eye on him. Assuage my curiosity. Perhaps, if things look bad, I’ll approach and offer...

My thoughts stall.

Offer him what, exactly?

Whatever he needs.

I stumble to a halt on the scuffed pavement and blink. Where the hell had that come from?

But I already know the answer: he’d saved my life. Before I’d recovered my memory fully, I’d been caught in a space battle beside Miss Noin and Quatre against an OZ patrol. If Sandrock had been equipped for space, the fighting would have been over quickly, but it hadn’t. Duo had shown up in Deathscythe just as I’d exhausted my ammo. Miss Noin had been bracing for the next wave—too many suits swarming toward us—and Quatre had been struggling to untangle Sandrock from an enemy Taurus. All three of us might have died if it hadn’t been for Duo’s timely arrival.

So I do owe him. The rationale is comforting.

“I’m the best friend you’ve got,” he’d bragged in the silence after the fighting and I’d believed him. Once the space helmets had come off and I’d looked into his dark eyes, I’d wanted to believe him. Duo hadn’t looked at me with expectation like the others had. Even though he must have had questions, suspicions, concerns. He’d even hung back with me when Heero and Wufei had arrived aboard Peace Million; only later had I realized that Duo had known both of them fairly well. He’d
let Quatre greet them. Duo had stuck by my side and just let me be.

Duo had given me what I’d needed.

I’m just here to return the favor. Nothing more, nothing less.

My first stop is a mid-range business hotel. I don’t even consider showing the clerk at the front desk Duo’s photo. I know he won’t be recognized here. Instead, I ask about a vacancy. There’s a room available. The rate is as exorbitant as I’d expected. I hum as I pretend to consider it, my fingers tapping on the colony map that is free for guests.

“Does this say Maxwell?” I inquire as if one of the the labeled landmarks has caught my eye.

“Maxwell? The church ruins, you mean?”

I give him a flat look. “Is there another Maxwell on this colony?”

“Not that I know of.”

In that case, it’s as good a place to start as any.

The clerk points at the map, indicating a location on the other side of the commercial sector, deep in the residential area that now looks more like a post-apocalyptic graveyard than a suburb.

“Ten minute walk?” I guess, knowing I’m being grossly optimistic.

“More like thirty. You’ll need a guide.”

My brows arch with manufactured surprise. “The route seems pretty straight-forward.”

“The safest route changes daily. If you’ve got your heart set on seeing the memorial, ask Hersh at the launder’s to find someone to take you there.”

“Huh. Thanks.”

“Would you like the room for the night?”

I nod. “I just might. I’ll be back.”

As I leave the establishment, I pretend not to notice how the clerk picks up the inter-colony phone. I consider my options as I meander toward the laundry shop that is on the corner of the next block. Clearly, the hotel clerk and Hersh have some kind of arrangement. Either it’s legitimate or it’s not. Regardless, my lack of surprise at hearing the price of the room had more or less confirmed the amount of money I’m carrying. For all I know, my guide will double-cross and attempt to rob or kill me.

I need another perspective.

It’s not hard to find one. Catching sight of a slumped figure in the narrow space between two buildings, I duck in. An old woman dressed in rags looks up when I pause beside the shelter she’s constructed from broken market crates.

She flinches when I crouch down against the opposite wall in the shadowed alley. I don’t smile, but I do give her a moment to take a long look at me. Decide if I’m a threat or not.

I wait until she tilts her head to the side. This is as close to an invitation as I’ll get.
I speak softly, “I’m sorry to bother you. I’m looking for the Maxwell Church.”

“The memor’al,” she adds with a nod of comprehension. “Neutral territory.”

“Neutral?”

“The one patch that is in this hunk-o-shiz can.”

“How do I get there?”

“Straight through the middle-o-the-mains.” She points an arthritic finger toward the streetlamp overlooking the street beyond. “Ain’t called ‘safelines’ for no reason.”

Interesting.

She speculates, “You got a hold?”

I don’t understand.

“Weapons, kitlet. A blade or stunker?”

I nod. “I’m armed.”

She purses her wrinkled lips at me in thought. “Don’t draw on the scout. You give him a swing or skop, but there’ll be eyes on your back, mind? His roamers tracking you. You show off your hold an’ they’ll gang you an’ gob up what you got.”

“Right.” I could imagine the situation she was describing. I had no objection to street fighting, but it would take time and energy that I’d prefer to spend in the process of finding Duo.

Fiddling with the bottom of my pant leg, I ask, “Can I trust Hersh at the launder’s to get me a good guide?”

“She’s boys knock them dark streets real well,” she tells me too loudly.

It would sound like an endorsement to an eavesdropper, but it’s a warning. I am aware that I look like an easy mark: a lone traveler, young and naive, unfamiliar with the colony and carrying enough credits to consider staying a night at that overpriced business hotel.

Thankful for the warning and understanding that even now someone somewhere is watching, I deftly tuck a ten-credit note into the cuff of my black turtleneck. Her gaze flickers, following the movement. Our eyes meet. A moment of understanding: this is the only way I can thank her without making her a target for muggers. Or a “scout” and “roamers.”

I stand suddenly and loom over her, reach down with both hands as if to grab her.

“Off me, you mocker! Go piss!” She bats my hands away before crossing her arms defensively over her chest and scooting back against the unwashed wall. I step away, hands lifted.

“Sorry. My mistake,” I mumble. I jog back to the main street, my shirt cuff no longer concealing any cash. The sleight of hand we’d performed reminds me of Duo.

My next stop is a military surplus and general store. The owner eyes me warily when I approach the counter without any merchandise in my hands. I eye the cigar display. The prices are easily five times those planet-side.
“I’m looking for Maxwell,” I tell him in an idle tone.

“The church memorial. You’re gonna need persuasion if you’re trekking solo.”

“This kind of persuasion?” I ask, reaching for the photo I’m carrying of Duo. The one that Wufei had thoughtfully sent me via vid connection, though he’d been adamant that it wasn’t a gesture of capitulation.

“I will locate Maxwell before you do,” he’d challenged me.

I’d smirked back. “Good luck with that.”

On the way to the spaceport, Heero had invited me to stop by the computer repair shop before it opened for the day so that I could print a copy.

I glance down at Duo’s image, his lips curved into a hard smirk and his eyes flashing with determination and perverse glee. I’m sure Duo would be thrilled to know that he has a Preventers file. I probably do, too. In fact, I’d be jealous of him if I didn’t.

I slide the photograph across the counter top as I watch the proprietor. I know I look bored, weary. Just going through the motions like I have no personal investment in this line of questioning whatsoever, but I’m reading every nuance of the shopkeeper’s body language.

He grunts. “Don’t know him.”

“So you won’t sell me what he came in here for?”

That gets his attention. Just as I’d planned. I’m about to find out if this man is a liar.

I tuck the photo away. He nudges the cigar cases aside, revealing an array of neatly packaged powders and pills. I recognize most of them. I’m disappointed that this is a dead-end; Duo would never purchase recreational drugs. But then the shop owner lifts away the tray and pulls out a small vial. One that’s familiar to both mercs and space-heads.

Jazz juice. Masher. Zipline. I don’t know what the name for it is here, but I know it’s one of the strongest stimulants and strength enhancers that the average human body can handle. I think about Duo’s nightmares. It’s entirely possible he really had been here and bought this.

“I get a taste before I buy.”

He opens his mouth to object, but then he sees the look on my face. I know what I look like: a merc who doesn’t give a shit about collateral damage.

Feeling somewhat charitable, I explain, “I don’t know you.”

“Don’t know you, neither,” he agrees, already reaching for a vial. I stop him and point to another. He opens the one I’d chosen. I lift my little finger, dip it into the red syrup, bring the drop to my nose for a sniff. Slightly sweet with citrus peel and a chemical odor I’ve never encountered anywhere else. My stomach clenches. I smear the drop on my lower lip. My pulse skips at the familiar burn. It’s been a long time since I’ve used, since I’ve had to use. Cathy will rip me a new one if she has to deal with me while I detox again, but until I find Duo, I have only myself to rely on.

I curl my lip in toward my tongue. The complex, bitter tang is true. My blood races in anticipation of the on-coming rush. It has been such a very long time. From the potency, I know I’ll be feeling the effects soon and probably for the next four hours.
Plenty of time to find Duo. Or turn this colony inside out. Whichever comes first.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I've included anything from the series in this chapter. Except for the vague reference that Heero owes Trowa a helluva favor because Trowa carried him off the battle field and patched him up during the war (after Heero was ordered to self-destruct himself and his Gundam). And also, Trowa had Heero's back several times while Heero was recuperating.
“How much?” I ask.

The stimulant is overpriced, too. I haggle, wearing the shopkeeper down to nearly half the original rate. He tenses when I reach a hand into my bag. I pounce on the moment of distraction: “Where can I find my friend?”

“Dunno. Sticks to the ol’ res-den.” He jerks his head in the direction of the moldering suburbs. Where the church ruins are.

“When did you see him?”

“Cycle before last.”

I pay him and palm the vial. I hope I won’t need it — hope I won’t use it even if I do need it — but I’m realistic enough to expect that I probably will.

“When’s he due back?” I ask, taking advantage of the tentative truce that comes in the wake of a successful transaction.

“This ain’t a prozzie hut; customers don’t need an appointment.”

There’s no point in taking offense at his display of attitude.

“You want an Allie bag?”

I give him narrow-eyed look.

He explains, “You said you wanted the same as he got. That’d include a bunk roll, sanitize gel, and cook-set.”

“When did he get all that?”

“Seven, eight rotations gone, mayhap.”
A rotation was a 24-hour colony day. I nod and follow the man’s gesture toward the wall of bundled sleeping bags. I choose one that has some outer wear but doesn’t smell like sweat or gunoil.

The sanitize gel I collect with a sigh — after I’d launched from the engineering bay in L3, taking Heavyarms to Earth for the first time, I’d hoped to never have to use this stuff again, but hot water and soap are expensive in space. The gel binds to dirt and grime, lifting it from skin and hair before drying to a fine powder that can be scrubbed off with a towel.

The cook-set includes a wide bowl with a lip on one side, mug cup, paring knife, and large spork with a long handle. As everything is metal and intended to be used over a direct heat source, an insulated mitten is provided.

Returning to the counter, I name a price for the items I’ve collected. We haggle again, but it’s more casual now. Routine.

When I step outside, I take the next right and follow the lamp-lined, middle-income street in the direction of the memorial. My steps quicken and my eyes dart from one focal point to the next as the zipline kicks in. Every detail is perfectly, painfully clear. Adrenaline surges through my veins. If only I had a mobile suit and a space battle to fight. The thought makes me shudder with need.

This is the very need that had given me the determination to deny the craving. I do not need things. I cannot need anything. I must not. It makes no sense for a nobody to need things. Besides, need is a weakness and I’m only human. Barely that, it seems, at times.

I pass a seedy-looking hotel and a moderately-priced youth hostel, but I don’t stop. There’s no point in showing a photograph of Duo and asking if anyone has seen him if he’d bought the very items that I had just purchased.

Duo clearly has access to a place where he feels safe enough to sleep but may not have a bed: he’d bought a sleeping bag. He has a stove: he’d bought a cook-set. He does not have access to hot water: he’d bought sanitize gel.

I consider what sort of place would fit those criteria. If he’d also purchased a generator or battery-powered hotplate, I’d bet he was in a condemned building of some sort. Perhaps he is; perhaps he’d purchased a heat source elsewhere. Or stolen one.

But if I’m right, it’ll be impossible for me to find him by process of elimination: over half of the colony has been abandoned by legitimate owners.

I take note of a market street that resembles a covered arcade and the vid phone booth tucked just inside the open gates. Without the graffiti. Would Duo consider sneaking into a place like this at night, tapping into the electricity to stay warm and cook dinner? Another possibility. Easier to check than my first guess would be.

Across the street is a grocer’s. In the next block, I see a dry goods shop. Non-perishables. One more block after that, the sight of a pawn shop with security grating over the front windows has me stepping into the middle of the road. There’s almost no traffic, so there’s nothing to stop me from taking the old woman’s advice.

From one street to the next, maintained homes with bars on the windows give way to houses whose owners can’t afford added protection or even basic maintenance. Then I leave those behind and I see more and more residents — squatters rather than actual owners — lounging out in the open. If they find some relief out-of-doors, I can only imagine how unbearable the interior of the houses must be.
I see people of all ages reclining in half-broken chairs. Drinking. Smoking.

They watch me go by, but no one tries to get my attention. No one moves to follow me. The middle-of-the-mains, between the lamp posts, does indeed appear to be a safeline.

What I don’t see is a single authority figure.

In neighborhoods like these, I seriously doubt that the police cruise the streets for the sake of protecting people and property. Especially not during the day portion of the colony cycle. I’d passed through places as dismal as this on Earth. Places where a small-time thug or dealer will bribe a cop to look the other way when the only other option is getting arrested and removed from whatever territory they’d managed to win. If lost, the fight to reclaim a particular street corner could be deadly.

I’m making my way through a particularly neglected neighborhood, glaring into each shadowed alley I pass and feeling predatory gazes on me in return, when a wide lot of uncleared rubble catches my eye. According to my memory of the map back at the hotel, this should be the memorial. I don’t know what I’d been expecting, but this untouched devastation had not been it.

Given that this is supposed to be neutral territory, I don’t hesitate to stop. I’m wearing well-worn clothing, carrying a grubby duffel and a stained sleeping bag, but it’s still possible that I’ll be hassled for money. If I am, I can and will handle it. But the moment I step off of the street and onto the site, I feel a shift in the air.

The slouching figures that had been clearly considering getting in my face, either out of boredom or curiosity, turn away. It’s as if I’m standing on hallowed ground.

Warily, I give the streets a searching look, forcing my twitching muscles to stay still. The zipline makes it hard for me to remain motionless, but I know how to focus.

_Open your eyes, Duo._

The thought grounds me even as it makes my heart stutter. I cling to the strength it evokes. I have no intention of sorting out my reaction to it, now or later. It’s enough that it works.

I memorize my surroundings down to the last broken window before allowing my focus to touch upon the twisted metal and broken chunks of synthetic stone, absently estimating the size and number of buildings that had once stood here. My gaze comes to rest upon a slab that had once been part of a wall, left standing to serve as a base for the sheet of metal bolted to its center. I’m mildly shocked that this hasn’t been claimed by scrap thieves, but here it is: a humble, commemorative ornamentation that had clearly been hammered and engraved by hand.

I read the scrap-steel plaque:

**Former site of the Maxwell Church**

_Destroyed in A.C. 188 during an Alliance attack against a rebel group taking refuge within. Two-hundred and forty-five souls were lost._

I frown and read the dedication again just to be sure, but the text remains unchanged. Only then do I allow myself to acknowledge the clear connection between the Maxwell Church and Duo Maxwell. I remember Duo wearing a priest’s shirt all throughout the war and I realize—

Duo had survived.
It’s not much, but it is a clue. I examine the site, looking for any evidence of someone’s recent passing, but I don’t see any flowers or trinkets laid out in memorial. I walk the lot carefully in a grid pattern so that I miss nothing, but there is nothing to find. Of course not. On this colony, nothing is allowed to go to waste. Not even a wilted blossom.

If Duo had come here since arriving on this colony, his presence had been as silent and illusive as a ghost’s.

I check my watch, glance up at the colony “sky” and sigh. I still have several hours before dark. My stomach growls with hunger. I ignore it.

For now, I need a defensive position and more intel. I skirt the ruins, evaluating each and every structure surrounding the block. I do the same for the human beings, those that I can see and those that I can’t but are likely indoors or lurking in the shadows.

I make a choice. I’m tempted to dip into the zipline again, but I don’t. It’s too soon. I’ve leveled off and this is the most dangerous time while on the drug: while I’m feeling “normal” and craving another boost.

I don’t need it. I won’t use it. I move on.

Stopping in front of a sagging apartment building, I tuck my hands into my pockets and make eye contact with the kid lounging on the front steps. He’s smoking and clearly enjoying it. If he’s as talkative as he is relaxed, he’s my best bet.

“Yo, you a trek-frek?” the kid calls out.

I shrug, unfamiliar with the term. “History interests me.”

He laughs. “Well, that there’s our sorry shiz history. You knocked that, then you knocked it all.”

I venture into the empty street, stopping in the center. “You look like someone who knows everyone around here.”

He shrugs. The gesture is loose and lazy. Whatever he’s smoking appears to be effective.

“You got any more of that?” I ask.

“If I did, I wouldn’t be halving out to a trek-frek.”

“I can trade.”

“What you got?”

I take a long moment to act out a show of serious deliberation before I reluctantly offer the sleeping bag.

He rolls his eyes. “Do I look like I’m achin’ out for one?”

He doesn’t. Not the way he’s draped over the chipped synthetic stone of the steps. “Well. Thanks anyway.” I turn away.

“Just a hank, man,” the kid calls. I stop. “You zoom off too light.” He pats the step next to him. “Have a smack an’ flap. Tell me a thing or what.”

“Is this your place?” I check.
“This patch is all mine. Nobody gonna take rent outta you. Except me maybe.”

I accept those odds and the offer. Still, I’m tensed, ready for a fight as I traverse the short distance, step across the broken sidewalk, and lean against the fake stone railing. I refuse to put my back to the darkened doorway and apartment foyer at the top of the stairs.

The kid’s dull brown eyes flicker with amusement. “Yeah, you knock how this can is. I could tell. But I keep my word. This is my patch and I waved you up.”

I watch him, watch the street. I wonder if it’s the zipline or my own instincts that make me feel hostile gazes on me. It could be either. Or both.

Down the block, a young man in grubby clothes crosses the street, a scowl on his face. On the other side of the lot, a middle-aged man in a stained maintenance uniform enters a darkened house. The slam of the door echoes.

The emptiness is an illusion. I know this. The zipline ensures that I feel it as well.

Turning back to my host, I slip the photo from my pocket. “You seen this guy around?”

The question earns me a smirk. The kid is unsurprised that I’m not really interested in whatever he’s smoking. “Who’s jacking for a look?”

“He’s a friend.”

I tap my finger against the photo. The kid leans forward and peers at the image. “You’re a pair,” he says with a leer that’s universal in meaning.

I shrug. So what if he thinks Duo and I are involved.

“You drop him for another boss?” the kid asks.

“No.” The question makes me wonder: “Why do you ask?”

“The sad fook’s shattered, man. Some bad kind of heartache.”

Shit. If Duo has been wandering the streets without his signature panache, no matter how superficial the mask may be, then he’s in dire straits. I need to find him. Today. “When did you see him?”

I recognize the grin I get. It’s time to barter.

“You jackin’ for a look, right?” he repeats.

“I want to actually see him in person,” I clarify, not daring to assume I understand what he means.

The kid nods. “I got you that. What you got me?”

I nod to the home-rolled, smoldering item clenched between his thumb and forefinger. “A means to get more of that.”

“An Allie bag don’t swap for shiz around here.”

I’d figured. “I’ll come up with something. I won’t waste your time for a favor.”

The kid takes another long drag, peering at me through narrowed eyes. “Lock, man.” He holds out a hand. We shake on it. “He’s routine. Part of the scene,” the kid adds at my blank look. He arches
back and glances at something through the open door and inside the dim foyer of the apartment building. “There’s time before he’ll be by.”

“Which direction does he come from?”

The kid gestures past my shoulder. I take a moment to re-evaluate my options before sitting down on the second-to-top step with my back to the solid railing. I don’t like being so close to the apartment doorway and whatever associates this kid might have just inside, but it’ll be more difficult for someone to attack me from behind. Reaching over the wide, solid railing at this height will be a challenge for anyone. I lean forward. With my elbows on my knees, my hands are close enough to the knife in my boot and the cash sewn into my pant legs. I’ll be able to reach either with a quick, casual movement. I glance toward the building. I don’t see any figures in the dingy hallway, but I spy a clock with a cracked glass face. Perhaps that’s what this kid had been consulting earlier.

“So, this a territory iss or true love?”

The question is probably designed to startle me, which is why I give the area another sharp evaluation. “It’s not about territory.”

“Heh. Well. Looks on you’re a fit, anyway.”

“How so?” I have no idea why I’d asked. I should tell this kid to shut up and smoke. I’m not ready for Duo to see me. Not yet. This conversation is bound to draw attention.

“Long hair blocks access — he sucks it and fucks it.” The kid laughs uproariously at my expression, nearly banging his head into the solid stone railing. “A gourmet boss. Rare to find one of them.”

I ignore the observation. “Have you ever spoken to him?”

“Nah. He’s stunking on some heavy shiz.”

The statement is about as clear as mud, but I don’t ask for clarification this time. I order, “Then don’t try to get his attention.”

The kid smirks, “Not reckoning on a warm welcome?”

I shrug, amazed that he can be this perceptive in spite of the effects of whatever he’s smoking. Either the drug itself isn’t very strong or the kid is playing with me. One way or another, I suppose I’ll find out.

“It’s been a long time,” I answer. “Just keep smoking.”

“Sure now.” He gives me a cocky salute and takes another slow drag.

We sit in silence. I continue my constant vigil of the street and the building beside me. The kid finishes his smoke. His fingers dip into the front pocket of his shirt. Out of the corner of my eye, I track his movements as he rolls another.

I hear the distant scuff of a heel on the street an instant before the kid mumbles, “He’s ahead today.”

I don’t turn around. “Mind your own business,” I murmur. “Pretend I’m not here.”

He lights the end of the stub, glancing up as a figure moves past. I watch the kid’s face, catching a flicker of shock in his expression.

There are two things I’m certain of: first, this kid is not as stoned as he’d like me to think he is, which
means he’s prepared to turn on me; and, second, the sight of Duo today is not what he’d expected. From my position, I can’t see Duo’s face clearly as he turns toward the memorial, but I can see the limp, dull braid, the exhaustion in his shuffling steps, the trembling of his hands, the slight twitch of his shoulders.

The last two are symptoms of extended zipline use. Or a very high dose. The shuffling could be from a lack of sleep. The dull braid isn’t surprising given his purchase of sanitize gel.

“Thats him, right?” the kid asks quietly.

I nod, watching as Duo steps into the ruins. He crouches at a spot that had seemed indiscernible from any other on the devastated plot, but it has clear significance for him. He slides abruptly to his knees, head bowed. Stays that way for several minutes. Then he gets up and moves to another spot.

“Your fault, you son of a bitch.” Duo’s voice is little more than a soft snarl, but I hear it in the windless air.

He turns abruptly away and marches over to a third area and here he collapses onto his hands and knees. I catch myself before I can stand and go to him, glad I’d remained seated when he rocks back on his haunches, hands fisted on his thighs, and tilts his face up toward the “sky.”

Then he lifts a hand to a nearby mass of twisted metal. Touches it gently, reverently, and places a kiss upon it.

My heart is pounding, but not from the zipline. I know exactly what I’m witnessing.

Duo is saying goodbye, a desperate and miserable farewell.

No.

He can’t. He can’t do what I fear he’s about to do. Duo Maxwell cannot give up. I won’t let him.

When he pulls himself to his feet and stumbles toward the memorial plaque, I get my first glimpse of his face: too pale skin, dark circles beneath his heavy-lidded eyes, lines of pain bracketing his mouth.

The kid and I both watch as he presses a hand to the metal plate. I use the opportunity to pull out another silk thread, releasing a few bills which I palm.

As Duo turns away and heads off in a new direction, I mumble to my business associate, “A deal’s a deal.”

He holds out his hand. We shake on it. The money slips from my grasp.

I stand up, adjusting the strap of my duffel and sleeping bag.

“Yo,” the kid calls.

I glance back and look into eyes that are too sharp for a stoned kid.

“Keep your money makers out of your pockets,” he tells me, lifting his hands and fisting them.

I nod.

He grins goofily, slumping back against the steps and slipping back into the laid-back persona of a harmless teenager. “Luck to you, man.”
Acknowledging the words with a casual wave, I focus on the street Duo had chosen and chart my course.

Chapter End Notes

My love of Sunhawk's incredible 1x2, Duo-POV arcs is showing:
I walk the lot carefully in a grid pattern so that I miss nothing, but there is nothing to find. Of course not. On this colony, nothing is allowed to go to waste. Not even a wilted blossom.
Pretty sure this line happened because of the visit that Ion-series Duo pays the site of the former Maxwell Church.

UP NEXT:
He's back thanks to popular demand: DARK, EDGY DUO.
And he’ll be sticking around for quite a while. (Keep your fingers crossed for Trowa!)
Neutral Ground

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: drug use (continued from previous chapter), reference to planned suicide


Music rec for Trowa's POV: “Empty With You” by The Used
Music rec for Duo's POV: “Breaking The Habit” by Linkin Park

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... TROWA ...

“Yo, fook. What you got me?”

I slow my steps and blend into a shadow as, further up the too-silent and lamp-less street, a heavily tattooed, muscled man swoops out of a narrow alley, blocking Duo’s path with a menacing air. This must be one of the scouts that I’d been warned about. I cast my gaze around, noting no less than three murky gaps between the shuttered shops that no doubt hide the rest of the gang members: his roamers.

“Go piss, Retcher,” Duo replies tiredly to the challenge, “or I’ll adjust your timing a second in line.”

“Luck to y—”

I blink as Duo lashes out with speed that not even a high on zipline could justify. Spinning, ducking under a beefy arm, he sends a right hook into the scout’s lower back. Kidney shot. The scout flinches in agony as Duo spins back around and kicks the guy’s right knee out from under him.

The scout falls to the sidewalk.

Surprisingly, Duo doesn’t take off. He leans over the prone man.

“Wave your roamers off before I lose my sense of humor.”

The guy laughs as he lifts a hand with a gesture that, apparently, is some kind of code to abort the planned attack. “Not into a sport today, J.D.?”

“You could say that,” he replies. “goodbye, Retcher.”

Duo continues on, undisturbed, to the end of the street and then turns left. I hurry after him, mildly surprised when no one tries to prevent me from following. Retcher is just sitting up with a wince as I dash past.

Reaching the corner, I lean around the left-side building and let out a breath of relief when my gaze finds Duo only ten meters ahead on a direct course for what looks to be another ruins.

I keep my distance, mindful of the gang that could be circling around through the alleyways to cage
me in. Despite the risk, I resolutely match Duo’s steps with silent strides of my own.

I’m not surprised when he turns neither left nor right, but comes to a stop directly in front of the guard gates to what must be an old Alliance base. From a carefully calculated distance, I watch as he sways slightly where he stands, staring straight ahead as if he’s arguing with himself, attempting to convince his stubborn feet to carry him the rest of the way. But he doesn’t move. He just sways and stares.

Is this the base responsible for the attack on the Maxwell Church? I spare the area a glance, taking note of the rubble that had once been office buildings and motor pool hangars. Whatever this place had instigated in the past, it surely isn’t in any condition to do so now. It is, obviously, abandoned.

Lost in whatever memory or vision that has overwhelmed him, Duo doesn’t move for the better part of half an hour. An impressive feat on zipline, which not only puts your senses on high alert but every muscle in your body as well.

I make no attempt to approach. I watch the streets, though, narrowing my eyes and fisting my hands when another scout gives me a measuring look from the opposite sidewalk. He takes in my posture, catalogs my meager possessions, and dismisses me with a smirk.

I return my attention to Duo and maintain my distance. Whatever this place is to Duo, it’s personal. Painful. He won’t welcome my presence right now. But perhaps later, on more neutral territory, I’ll have a chance. One chance. Hopefully, that’s all I’ll need.

With a shudder that, even thirty paces away, I can clearly see, Duo pivots almost violently on his heel and veers to the right. Head down, hands in his pockets, he nearly runs away from the ruined base.

I follow.

He takes a second right onto a lamp-lined street, a safeline. The condition of the houses improves as we move back toward downtown.

Several blocks pass without interruption in either Duo’s speed or temperament until the sound of childish laughter and squabbling has him stumbling to a halt. His head snaps to the left and his entire body tenses at the sight of a boy and girl playing in a pathetically desolate, low-budget excuse for a playground. They bounce a basketball between them, aiming for the warped rim of a battered hoop that looms over the cracked court.

Duo’s body language immediately changes from coiled-spring to defeated-exhaustion. A peculiar tightness throbs in my chest; Duo’s just been reminded of Heero. And Heero’s new life. And Heero’s advice. And the fact that Heero hadn’t been there for him. And the hard truth that Duo is very much all on his own.

I suddenly wish I’d punched Heero Yuy in the jaw two days ago when I’d had the chance.

As frustrating as it is to put that off and as maddening as it is to tuck the thought away, that’s precisely what I do. Vengeance will have to wait.

Duo cannot.

He sprints from the scene, dashing into a shop in the middle of the next block.

Neutral territory. Finally. I take up position beside the grimy door and wait.
One minute becomes two. Then three. Five.

The door starts to swing open. I glimpse him through the gap along the hinges and I time it perfectly: just as Duo emerges from the general store, supplies cradled in his arms, I step off the sidewalk and reach for the door.

Our bodies crash together and the recycled-plastic bag crinkles between us. I drop my duffel bag, taking a careful step back so that I’m standing on the shoulder strap, and I reach up to steady both Duo and his groceries. It also gives me the opportunity to glance down into the sack. I have just enough time to observe a sealed plastic bag of something that is probably peanut butter, a loaf of bread with a day-old sticker, and a fifth of whiskey.

“I’m sorry—” I begin, and then, pretending to take a closer look at the person behind the reusable bag, I say, “Duo?”

He really does look like hell. Too much zipline and too little sleep will do that.

Duo gapes. “Trowa? What the hell are you doing here?”

I’m fairly certain my arched brow is courtesy of Wufei, he-who-does-not-capitulate. “Shopping?”

We step away from each other, allowing the door to close.

“No, I meant what are you doing in outer space? Is the circus here?”

“No. Just me.” I scoop up my duffel bag. “I heard there were some jobs in construction out this way.” It’s a lie, of course. But, luckily, I’ve never felt Duo’s almost manic compulsion to avoid falsehoods.

“What happened with the circus?”

I shrug.

Duo doesn’t press. He blinks. I can see how he struggles to minimize the zipline tremors. His high is waning. “Well, hell. It’s good to see you again.”

I study Duo for any signs of insincerity, but his exclamation appears to be genuine. I answer him as I’d answered Quatre, “It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah.” For a moment, Duo looks almost sad, but then he takes in my wrinkled clothes and the duffel bag clutched in my hand. “You look like you just got off the shuttle.”

I force my mouth into a wry grin. “That might be because I just did?” More or less.

Duo chuckles. “I don’t remember you having a sense of humor. It’s good, though. I mean, it’s working for you.” Growing serious once again, he considers my sudden appearance with open curiosity. “Man, it’s almost creepy running into you like this.”

“Literally.”

Duo shifts nervously, oddly unsure of what to say next. I don’t remember him having this kind of trouble before. It’s especially strange after I’d seen him take down Retcher with speed and competency.

Perhaps it’s time to implement the next phase of my plan. “Duo, I know it’s been a long time and I have no right to ask but...”
I have his full attention now. Depending on what reaction I can read from him, I’ll choose from a variety of predetermined requests and half-truths.

Duo presses, looking intrigued and anxious and... hopeful, “But?”

That decides it. I forge onward, attempting to sound a little awkward. It’s hard to force the inflection into my voice. I could blame the zipline, but there’s no point. The pressure from what’s at stake here on this grimy street strangles my vocal chords. “I haven’t got anyplace to stay yet and I can’t really afford...”

Duo glances away and that alien, uncomfortable look is back. “Aw, hell, Tro. I’d offer to let you crash at my place but it’s a real dump.”

“That doesn’t bother me,” I assure him. “Unless you’d rather be alone.” I take a gamble in using that last word. I can only hope it will remind Duo of how very much he doesn’t want to be alone right now. I wonder if the reminder will be enough to make him desperate for company, even my company.

Forcing a bright grin, Duo says enthusiastically, “Naw, man. I’d be great to have you over.”

I nod. “Thanks. I appreciate it.” For another long moment, we simply look at each other. When the silence between us begins to grow awkward, I tilt my head toward the store at Duo’s back. “I’ll just get a few things, then?”

“Sure. I’ll wait here for you.”

I have no desire to let him out of my sight knowing full well that Duo might change his mind, might disappear into the maze-like ghost town that makes up so much of this colony. But I’d clearly been heading for this shop. It would be suspicious if I didn’t at least go inside. The best I can do is be quick and hope that if Duo does decide to renege his offer, I’ll be able to pick up his trail again.

Before he finishes his last meal and indulges in a bottle of liquid courage.

... DUO ...

From behind the crumpled bag clutched to my chest, I let out a long breath.

God, what the hell? Had I really just slammed into Trowa Barton on the damn street? Jesus.

I blink through the hazy vision of Libra’s gunmetal-gray corridors as we’d passed each other in the wake of smoke and flames and the remnants of scorched mobile suits.

Trowa, don’t go getting yourself killed...

My skin tingles. A belated rush from the masher.

I tremble as my blood slows and the mindless elation fizzles out, leaving me in the middle of the worst possible reality I could be in.

Of all the times I might have seen him again, of course it has to happen today. Now. And, naturally, he has no clue what kind of place this is. If I don’t get him out of sight by nightfall, he could be hurt. Real bad.

I can’t let that happen. But. God damn it. I’m such a moron for offering to let him crash with me.
I’d just been so shocked that he’d even asked. I cannot recall a single thing Trowa Barton has ever asked me for and suddenly here he is, looking at me with those green eyes. Needing me.

Well, not me. No one in their right mind would rely on me. But he sure as hell needs someone to guarantee that he makes it to the next day cycle with all his bits still attached. Which is me. Because I’d fucking volunteered.

Wait. Had I? Is this really happening? Or is the masher totally mindfucking with me? It wouldn’t be the first time.

I watch Trowa moving around in the shop through the unwashed windows. He scoops up two jugs of refiltered water and a large pack of sanitary body wipes. I’m forced to conclude that he’s really here.

Which means I am totally fucked over. I won’t have enough time to get him tucked into my bolthole and then make it to the cargo ports before it’s too late.

It’s either my life or his. Basically.

Oh God is this gonna get ugly.

“Unless you’d rather be alone.” Trowa’s soft ultimatum echoes between my ears.

Now, I admit that the idea of heading back to my little hole in the wall and staring at the gloom for one more mostly-sleepless night all on my lonesome doesn’t hold much appeal. Holds zero appeal, to be totally honest. Which is why I’d finished off the masher today and steered clear of the places where I could restock. Besides, it’s been over seventy hours since I’ve slept. I know what happens to mash-heads who dare to dose up nonstop without a solid eight hours of sleep in between and it ain’t pretty.

I shudder, hating the tremors that will only get worse the longer I fight my exhaustion. At least I’d come up with a plan to go out on my own terms… which, thanks to Trowa Barton, has been shot to hell.

If I were smart, I’d be high-tailing it out of here while I still can.

I close my eyes, tell myself that pride is important. It’s all I have left at this point.

I tell my feet to move.

They don’t.

The hell if I know why. I don’t want to know why. To my eternal shame, I remain right where I am.

God damn it.

Fucking weak-ass masher. If I’d had another dose on me, I probably would have taken it and to hell with the fallout. The run-in with Retcher had burned through the high faster than I’d budgeted. If only I hadn’t spent my last credit on real whiskey, I could have taken Trowa to a hotel and tossed his ass in a locked room until the next shuttle off this shithole.

But that would have meant giving up the whiskey. Without it, I doubt I’d have gotten very far.

I recall the looks of pity from the Sweepers and the cool, detached evaluation in Heero’s eyes. God,
but it burns knowing that they’d all either seen or heard me at my absolute worst. They’d taken a good long look and sent me packing. Oh, they hadn’t been mean about it or anything. But still, they’d made it quite clear that I’d worn out my welcome.

Time to move on. Long past time.

I look down at the whiskey.

All I need is enough strength to follow through with my own fucked up version of last rites. I consider asking Trowa for a… favor. It’s his fault I’m in a bind. He owes me, damn it. Besides, of all the people I can think of, he’s the only one who might go through with it. After he realizes how pathetic I am.

Trowa’s voice reaches me through the shoddy door of the shop — the proprietor asks if he needs anything else and I hear my new roommate say, “No, thank you. This will be all.” — and I know I’ll end up begging him.

So much for pride.

I bow my head in defeat. Shit.

“Duo?’

I look up with a small jolt and find Trowa gazing at me with what just might be a smidgen of concern. I almost gasp. Dear God, but I’d give anything for someone to care.

I summon another grin around the sharp, stabbing pain in my chest. I manufacture another enthusiastic pose. I pull on another mask. “Change your mind?”

Trowa considers me for a moment, his expression just barely softening. “Of course not.”

“Cool. Follow me. The horrors await.”

I force myself remain nonchalant, but the truth is I honestly don’t expect Tro to last the night. I know I sure as hell won’t.

Chapter End Notes

Again, there’s a reference to a scene in the series. Duo thinks of when he'd seen Trowa on Libra for what could have been the last time (so he hopes Trowa will survive the rest of the battle; Duo's got to get the scientists to Peace Million so he can't watch Trowa's back).

Zipline/masher -- this is a totally fake drug (i.e., I made it up). I guess it's something like cocaine? It's an extreme stimulant and, in this GW universe, the users are generally people who have to work under extreme pressure, such as mercenaries and mobile suit operators (whose job it is to inspect or repair the outer skin and components of a colony), solo space pilots, space salvage workers, and so on (Trowa lumps all these jobs under "space-heads" which means people who make a living working in outer space itself and not just on a colony or resource satellite). The side-effects of zipline/masher are also made up. As are the withdrawal symptoms and effects. Totally and completely made up. Any similarity to other drugs is coincidental.
“Eat,” I tell him, thrusting the peanut butter sandwich into his shaking hands. I quickly squeeze out another dollop from the vacuum-sealed bag and smear it across a slice of stale bread with the knife from Duo’s cook-set. “You’ll need your strength for what’s coming.”

Duo lifts his chin from his chest and blinks at me. He’s slumped on his sleeping bag, shoulders pressed against the dust-smeared wall where he’d collapsed two seconds after our arrival.

Focusing on the sandwich, he startles visibly. “What the hell?”

Gesturing to the food in his twitching grasp with my own hastily assembled sandwich, I tell him, “You’re crashing on zipline. Eat. Now.”

Duo shakes his head. “Pass the whiskey, man.”

“No.”

He blinks slowly. “Did you just say ‘no’?”

I had, indeed.

“You promised,” he rasps, his voice shaking. Despite that, I can hear the betrayal.

I had promised him. “To follow your directions—”

He thrusts out a trembling hand for the bottle that I’d stashed behind my back, against the far wall and out of his reach.

“—until we got to your place,” I conclude, easily recalling the vow he’d exacted from me as we’d begun the trek from the shop. I’d agreed to follow his instructions exactly, heeding his warning to stick to the shadows as we’d turned down one grimy, lampless street and then another, passing countless boarded-up houses just like this one. The sign on the door had warned of both the building’s dubious structural integrity and the possibility of legal action being taken against anyone caught trespassing. We’d slipped in through the back.
The house is blocks away from any legitimate tenants. In fact, the entire neighborhood has been condemned by the look of things. A single streetlamp lists on the corner like the banner of a defeated enemy on an ancient battlefield.

“The fuck you say,” he snarls. “You agreed to do everything I told you to. That promise didn’t stop at the door.”

“As far as I’m concerned, it did.” I take a bite, chewing carefully as I speak around the mouthful, “Eat.”

He shakes his head. “You’re here. Safe ‘til you can get your ass on a shuttle tomorrow. So that’s me done. Don’t make me beg, Tro.”

I move to kneel on his sleeping bag, mindful of the fact that he’s undoubtedly carrying at least one knife and could be faking his weakness for the sake of drawing me in. I stuff my sandwich between my lips and collect the food from his shaking hands. With abrupt, angry flicks of my wrist, I twist off a bite-sized piece and hold it up. My mouth is full, so I grunt at him. His shoulders twitch. He glares at me. I glare back. His head falls against the wall and he opens his mouth. I poke the first bite between his lips. He chews twice. Swallows with a wince.

He doesn’t look at me, just glares up at the cracked ceiling.

I hadn’t expected to come all this way just so he could hate me, but I’ll be damned if I let him have that bottle. I feed him another gob of bread and peanut butter, taking the time to remove what’s left of my sandwich from my own mouth to ask, “How long have you been dosing without sleep?”

“Almost eighty hours.”

Shit.

“Let me end it on my terms.”

“Not tonight.”

“Trowa—”

“Eat.”

He does. When I tell him to drink some refiltered water, he manages a half a dozen swallows. It’ll have to be enough. The shakes are getting visibly stronger. If I force him to eat or drink more, he may end up choking to death on his own vomit.

“End it,” he coughs, grabbing for my hand and dragging it to the knife handle in his boot. “I’m not gonna make it anyway.”

“You will. I know what to do. Let me do it.”

“If I say ‘no,’” he wheezes, his teeth chattering, “you’ll just do it anyway.”

That is true. “It’ll be easier if you hear yourself say it.”

He rolls his eyes, unconvinced.

I implore, “Trust me. Just this once.”

Night has finished its fall outside. Duo’s dark eyes blink at me in the weak glow of the small, battery
powered heater-slash-hotplate. Light from the broken streetlamp outside flickers in fits and starts. The silhouette of the sagging, haphazardly fixed boards across the window flashes upon the far wall. I don’t look away from him.

A tremor wracks his body hard enough to slam the back of his skull into the wall with a dull *thud!*

“Damn you,” he grits out, his eyes closing briefly. “You fucked up my plan. You owe me.”

I grab for my duffel bag and the spare turtleneck I’d packed. “OK, I owe you. But not that.”

He hisses as his body shudders hard enough to cause his arms to flop at his sides.

“Duo?” I prompt.

He rolls his head toward me. “Won’t change a thing.”

My hands fist in the stretchy fabric of the shirt. “One more fight,” I negotiate quickly. “If you ask me again a week from now, I’ll do whatever you want.”

I watch his face scrunch up as he fights back tears. “Deal,” he sobs.

I move quickly, wrapping the sleeves and chest of the shirt around his head, tying his jaw shut so that he can’t bite his own tongue in half. Diving back into my bag, I grab my extra pair of jeans and bind his wrists to his hips, careful to wedge some fabric against his palms to protect the flesh from his fingernails.

Arranging him in his sleeping bag, I manage to tug the zipper up past his knees before the first seizure hits. I throw myself behind him, caging him with my arms and legs, pressing a hand to his forehead and trying to keep him snug against my shoulder. What follows is one of the most strenuous three hours of my life. Considering the fact that I’d spent most of my childhood strapped in a mobile suit, moving from one battle to the next, that is no small estimate.

It’s almost midnight when the first wave leaves Duo limp and whimpering. After unbinding his arms, I grab the flashlight from my duffel and quickly reconnoiter the house, going only as far as to locate the bathroom before carrying Duo inside and sitting him down on the commode. My fingers move quickly in the pitch darkness as I unfasten his jeans, tugging both the pants and his underwear down to his ankles. He leans on me, half unconscious as his body purges itself. I hold him up.

My own dose of zipline has long since worn off. I’m trembling with exhaustion as I clean him up, reassemble his clothes, and haul him back to our room. I’m careful to sanitize my hands before I release the binding on his jaw. I poke a few more small pieces of bread-and-peanut-butter into his mouth. Force a little more refiltered water down his throat.

When the fine tremors return, I bind him up a second time and lock my limbs around him. I count the seconds, minutes, hours. My muscles have long since cramped, hard and tight, when his body goes lax for the second time.

“Duo?” I rasp, my eyes watering, begging for sleep. I can barely see straight.

He groans. I tear at the bindings, haul him over my shoulder, and stagger back to the bathroom. This time, we hold each other up as his body voids its toxins for a second time. I practically drag him back to the bedroom. Collapse against him on the sleeping bag. My hands are shaking as I wrap him up again for the third wave.

Amazingly, what I endure is nothing compared to the twisting guts, straining muscles, and pounding
headache that Duo suffers in varying intensity for hours on end. I know; I’ve detoxed before. Most users who rapid-dose on zipline end up dead from the effects of the seizures. I’m lucky Cathy had been willing to tie me down to an old bunk, hunt up a rubber mouth guard, and pour water into me after I’d dosed for over forty-eight hours straight. Five waves of seizures later, I’d come back to my senses soaked in my own filth.

I won’t put Duo through that if I can help it. It’s bad enough that he has to ride out the seizures. Coming to after five waves had been enough to wish myself dead.

Duo suffers through a total of eight of them: three in darkness… the third is fading as the light from the streetlamp flickers and finally shuts off… another wave slams into him while colony dawn seeps into the house… the shadows creep across the dingy floor as the colony lights brighten — a fifth — the colony daylight moves in a simulated arc — numbers six and seven — and dim again bringing the eighth and weakest wave with artificial twilight.

At least I no longer have to haul him to the bathroom and hold his braid away from the toilet; after the first two waves, there had been nothing left in his guts for his body to push out. It’s just as well. Despite taking care to ration our water and eat whenever I can, my strength is at an end.

An elbow poking me in the side has me startling awake and rolling off of Duo with a groan. I grunt when my arm smacks against the wall, skinning my knuckles on the pockmarked surface. “Sorry,” I manage; I’d passed out on top of him. It’s a miracle I hadn’t smothered him.

I’m too wrung out to bother undoing the binding around his jaw. I simply pull the mess of cloth off of his head. He doesn’t even complain when I yank a few hairs out that had gotten twisted up in the knots. I actually have to watch my fingers to ensure that they work well enough to free his arms. After I toss the jeans away, I blink at my watch. No wonder my stomach feels hollow; it’s been twenty-four hours. As if it had been waiting for me to check the time, the street light outside flickers.

I let my arm flop down onto Duo’s rib cage. I can feel him breathing though I doubt he’s still awake. I should get up. Move back to my sleeping bag. Before Duo summons the strength to stab me in the liver for what I’d made him go through.

Just five more minutes, I promise myself, letting the rise and fall of Duo’s torso lull me into a fitful doze.

I could have dropped off instantly if his words hadn’t circled back around through my brain, buzzing like insects: “Let me end it on my terms.”

Duo had honestly expected me to help him kill himself. I just… I need a moment. I have to burn through the rage at Heero for letting it come to this. I have to shove aside my frustration with Howard, who should have made more of an effort to help Duo in the first place. I have to push through the sharp thrill of fear at the thought of arriving a day later than I had.

“Won’t change a thing,” Duo had sworn, and I cover my eyes with my other hand. I’ve got a week to change his mind. I can’t even begin to figure out how I’m going to manage it. All I’m certain of is that failure is not an option.

I come to with a shiver as the malfunctioning streetlamp flickers through the darkness. I’d fallen asleep again. Damn it.

My left side is warm where Duo snuggles against me. My right side is pressed to the cold wall. Careful not to jar my bunk mate, I check my watch. Just after midnight.

A faint whimper, little more than a squeak, punctuates the darkness.
I lean up on one elbow, nearly holding my breath as I watch and listen.

His feet kick weakly, rustling the sleeping bag still zipped up to his knees. A weak moan ekes out of his throat, hitching in mid-breath.

Duo is dreaming. Vividly, I’m sure. That’s what happens when you crash back to reality from a zipline high, seizures or not. The only reason I haven’t had a nightmare yet is because Duo had beaten me to it and woken me up first.

In the faint light, I can just make out the frown pulling at his brows. I can both feel and hear his restless movements. I can smell the sharp odor of fear. Duo’s lips part, moving slightly as if attempting to form words. A callused hand pushes at my chest defensively. I draw a deep breath and hope I don’t end up making things worse.

I gather the exposed hand in my own, hooking my thumb around Duo’s. It’s a safety clasp, a climber’s clasp. A warm presence calling one’s partner back from a dangerous precipice.

As soon as my fingers wrap around the base of Duo’s thumb and wrist, he quiets. Knowing that nothing is ever this easy, I wait and watch. Sure enough, after a long moment, a second choked-off noise escapes from Duo’s throat.

It’s a theory of mine that most nightmares begin with tension. Dreams are a natural element of sleep, but if the body is physically braced for a confrontation, then the mind will readily supply unpleasant imagery, dredging up fears from the darkest and most distant recesses of the subconscious. The body responds with more tension and the mind supplies additional fodder for the nightmare, which generates further tension… and so on and so forth. Therefore, the key to breaking the cycle is to remove the catalyst; that is, relieve the physical tension.

I have no idea if what I have in mind will work for Duo or if my efforts will be enough to counteract the strength of his withdrawal. It’s only a theory. But I know I sleep better after an exhausting show or practice followed by a hot shower, a session of stretching, and a concentrated effort to calm my breathing.

Slowly, gingerly, I sit up and reach behind Duo’s shoulders with my free hand, gently placing my thumb and forefinger on either side of his neck. Carefully, I begin a firm, slow massage. As expected, Duo’s muscles are taut with stress and I settle myself more comfortably; I’m going to be here for a while.

I keep up the pressure, kneading the straining muscles, listening to the sound of Duo’s breathing, keeping my eyes on what I can see of Duo’s face in the wash of the flickering light from the streetlamp and the glow of the heater. I have no interest in waking Duo. What he needs is a good night’s sleep, which has clearly been an elusive luxury, even without factoring in the zipline.

My fingers are aching before Duo’s tension begins to bleed away and then it’s as if someone has flipped a switch. Duo completely relaxes and rolls over onto his back and then curls up on his other side, dislodging the grip I’d kept on his hand.

I pull my hands away from him, but I don’t leave. Not yet. I wait. I listen to Duo’s breathing. It’s slow and even. In the muted light, the creases across his forehead have disappeared. Satisfied, I pick myself up off of his bed and tug the sleeping bag up to his shoulders. Tumbling onto my makeshift bunk, I squirm between the down layers, hoping to join Duo in getting a little more rest. If I’m lucky, I’ll manage another hour or two before Duo’s night terrors wake me again.
I remember.

Tremors. The entire colony shaking from rifle blasts. A nearby battle.

Walls smacking into me. The acrid stench of burned flesh and the terrible crack of buildings breaking apart.

Screams.

Silence.

Straining to push through the emptiness of space. Outer space is death itself.

Like me.

Agony. Holy shit agony. My muscles burn and sizzle on my bones, pulling my scattered thoughts together in an instant.

I should be dead right now and I remember exactly why I’m not: Trowa fucking Barton.

“To my knowledge, I don’t have a middle name.”

Asshole.

He chuckles at my incoherent grunt of annoyance as if he’d actually understood it. I try to decide what to call him next, but then he shifts. The sound of sleeping bag fibers rustling has me opening my eyes. It’s still dark out. Or dark again? I grab for a memory that isn’t slippery and coated in flaming misery.

“Here. Drink some water.”

I roll over. Or, that’s what I try to do. I don’t shift more than four damn inches before every part of my body is screaming at me. Holy fucking hell. Had I been the basketball in a finals showdown between Team Aries and Team Taurus or some damn thing? I splat onto my back with a teeth-grinding grimace.

A nearly empty jug of refiltered water hovers in front of my face. I lift my pounding head very slowly and then one warm hand is cradling the back of my skull and the other is tipping the water carefully toward my chapped lips and dry tongue.

He doesn’t even let me manfully gulp the shit. Oh, no. Can’t have that. I have to sip. One. Tiny. Minuscule. Bit. At. A time.

Finally, I get irritated enough to knock his hands and the water away from me. I croak accusingly, “I’m not dead.”

“You are not dead,” he confirms.

“You’re fault.”

He gives me a single, somber nod. “I’m OK with that.”

“Good for you,” I intend to sneer, but I’m just too damn wrecked to manage more than a sarcastic monotone. I drag my wrist up and gape at my watch. Seriously? Fuck all that’s gone to shit. I’d
been detoxing for something like thirty hours.

“Does this place have running water?”

I let my arm fall when a quiver in my muscles threatens to turn into a full-blown round of shaking. Even that much abrupt motion has me wincing. “Yeah. Running water: check.”

“Is anyone going to notice if I use it?”

I shake my head. “Be warned, though, it just barely meets sanitation guidelines. And it’s cold enough to make your balls crawl up your ass and never come back out of hiding.”

I hear a sound that might have been a snort of amusement.

“Thanks for the heads up.” Trowa rummages in his bag and pulls out a flashlight before grabbing an empty water jug. I close my eyes and don’t watch him leave the room.

Down the hall, the bathroom door opens with a soft squeal of old hinges. The sound of water running from the tap in the shower stall gushes in the darkness of midnight. For a second I almost worry that he’s gonna try to be a macho super-human and suffer through a round of bathing like a brainless moron. But he doesn’t. And, anyway, I know he isn’t. He’s many things, but he’s not stupid.

Less than a minute later, I hear the sploosh-and-whoosh of water being poured into a small basin. Once… twice… and again…

The flush of the toilet isn’t any louder than the fussing around he’d been doing in there, but it hits me like anti-aircraft artillery. I suddenly realize that I’m not wallowing in my own piss and shit. I should be, though; that’s what happens during detox. Or so I’d heard. Scowling, I sift through my memories: a brief impression of Trowa’s hands on my pants fastenings in the dark; the scent of human waste; the warmth of a strong shoulder under my cheek.

Jesus. This is the last thing I need, this immolating shame. Trowa had more than gotten me through detox. Hell, he’d probably wiped my ass for me.

By the time Trowa steps into the room again, I’ve curled up into a ball facing the wall, torn between denying what he’d done for me and marveling that he’d done it at all. What had I ever done for him that would evoke this kind of consideration? Not a damn thing that I can think of.

But, then again, he’d reassembled Heero, post-self-destruction. Maybe care-taking is his thing? If so, then I doubt he’s gonna follow through with our deal.

I sigh. God, I’m so tired. So fucking tired.

I want to sleep, but I know I can’t. I shouldn’t. The reason for the masher is still here, inside my head, and waking Trowa by screaming bloody murder in the middle of the night is the last thing I want to do. Not because it’ll mean having to move before the roamers get a lock on this house, and not because I’m worried about interrupting Trowa’s beauty sleep or some dumb shit, but because he’ll ask. And when I tell him to fuck off, he’ll look at me the same way Heero had. Or maybe the way Howard had. Or my personal favorite: the way Hilde hadn’t looked in my direction at all in the final days of the business.

Checking the time, I consider the cargo docks. I weigh my physical fatigue and aches against the odds of making it there without encountering any scouts or skin hunters.
Nope. Not gonna happen.

Not tonight, anyway.

But like hell I’m going back to sleep.

When I roll onto my knees, pausing to gasp at the spectacular pain, Trowa says nothing. He’s awake, though, watching me. I can see the shine of his eyes in the faint light.

I shuffle toward the doorway.

He draws in a breath. The sleeping bag fabric rustles as he tenses, ready to lurch after me if I try and make a break for it, maybe.

I shut myself in the bathroom before he can share whatever’s on his mind. The air is still thick with the stench of a toilet left unflushed for too long, but I’ve smelled worse. Hell, I’d hidden and slept near worse. A colony’s waste management base is actually a really good spot for homeless kids to wait out the night cycle in. Especially since the only way in without a physical key and series of locking codes is through narrow vents. Given that none of us had bathed in our entire lives, more or less, we hadn’t been hassled by skin hunters. Well, not too often that it had become a serious threat.

Thank God I’d gotten Trowa off the streets before nightfall. Gundam pilot slash mercenary slash acrobat or not, there’s nothing anybody can do to fight the “sweet dreams” darts. If a skin hunter gets a bead on some young, lovely-and-lone thing, bang! It’s lights out. By the time the sorry fucker comes to, the poor bastard is on his or her way to a new owner. Hell, there would have been a bidding war over Tro and his green, green eyes. Full head of hair. Complete set of pearly whites. The scars can be tatted over, so. Yeah. No question about it. Tro would make one helluva pet. The skin hunters might even turn on each other for the chance to bag and auction him.

I shiver. This place. Jesus Christ. It’s a miracle I’d made it out unscathed the first time around.

Leaning over the sink, I swallow back the swarming nausea and reach for the tap. It’s easy enough to find it in the dark; I’ve done this routine about a million and a half times. I tug both my long-sleeved T-shirts off and ball them up. Tuck them between my knees. Ruthlessly splash my face, shoulders, arms, and chest with frigid water.

Whoo-hoo! That woke me up. Too bad it’s gonna be another two hours before the day cycle kicks in. Also, every twitch and roar of my abused muscles reminds me of the fact that my body is still hating on me hard.

I use my funkily aromatic shirts to soak up some of the water before I end up with a cold and wet waistband, and then I shuffle back to the most defensible room in the house. I’d chosen that particular bedroom for the boarded-up window that can be kicked out if necessary and the hallway leading off in two directions to no less than four separate rooms with shabby windows of their own. The fact that this place is vacant of anyone else squatting in it probably says a thing or two about how thin the pickings are for skin hunters and roamers right now.

I’ve been here for the past four days and three previous sleepless nights, which means it’s time to move. Especially since Trowa had left the heater light on all night — that’s what the depleted fuel cell gauge indicates, anyway. Thank God for the mostly-working streetlamp outshining the soft glow or we might have had unwelcome company.

I step over the bedroom threshold, scowling against the headache that I’m pretty sure is never gonna fucking go away, determined to sit my roommate down for a lecture on survival in an enclosed metal
Trowa is sitting up with his long legs folded and crossed, his head bowed, shoulders slumped, and arms in his lap. Damn but that does not look comfortable at all.

With a sigh, I toss my shirts onto my sleeping bag and step over to his side.

He stirs. “Duo?”

“Yeah, I’m here, and I’m gonna stay up for a while. You sleep now, Tro.”

“You going out?”

“No,” I promise, wondering where my fury had disappeared to. I sure as hell hadn’t managed to lose any of the agony, but gone it is; I can’t be angry with him when his eyes are bloodshot and his body is listing slowly to the side. I reach out and nudge him down. Tuck him in. “I won’t go anywhere without you.”

His lips twitch, curving softly. Holy hell. I’ve just made Trowa Barton crack a smile. “Glad I bumped into you,” he breathes.

In the next instant, he’s out. Down for the count. Totally wiped.

My jaw clenches before I remember that even my face hurts. I let out a long breath and collect the bottle of whiskey, move to pack it in my bag and dig out my last set of clean clothes. With a grimace, I smear sanitize gel over my skin, waiting the five minutes it takes for the shit to dry before using my dirty shirts to scrub it off. Bleh.

As I get changed, I continue to keep my back turned to him but can’t help glancing over my shoulder. He looks so fucking young. So much younger than I feel. Or have felt in a real long time.

I repack my bag. Always be ready to skedaddle. That’s one of the most important rules to live by here. I regard Trowa’s assembled duffel bag with a wry smirk. Yeah, he’s figured out that much somewhere along the line.

As I put my boots back on, double knotting the laces, my fingertips drift over the knife handle. It doesn’t take much finesse to sever your own jugular. Why hadn’t I done that when Trowa had insisted on saving my sad, sorry life? Because he would have risked his own safety trying to get me to a hospital in the dark or because I’d wanted to be saved?

Huh.

Who knows. Doesn’t matter, I guess. It won’t matter in the end.

I remember our deal. Trowa’s got something like six days to convince me to change my mind. What he doesn’t get is that I can’t. Even if I’d wanted to, I just... can’t.

Chapter End Notes

When I recently re-watched the end of the series, I noticed that following a space battle...
with mobile dolls, everyone (Duo, Quatre, and WuFei) are totally out of breath, but NOT Trowa. That boy has epic endurance. So that's how he makes it through Duo's detox (after he's come down from a slight high himself).

I can't believe I'm leaving a note about toilet things, but here we are, just a little FYI:

Pouring a critical amount of water into a toilet bowl will cause it to flush automatically (without having any water stored in the tank or without pushing the lever). You just need to make sure that the plumbing leading to the sewer is clear and whoosh! The mess is gone. This method is also quieter as the water tap doesn't sloooowly run to refill the tank. Of course the water in the bowl isn't remotely clean or fresh, but as no one has cleaned any of these res-den homes in, like, a decade or two, it probably doesn't matter.
I wake to a touch on my shoulder. Duo’s face is the first thing I see. The sound of water blasting in the shower is the first thing I hear. His fingers press against my lips, ensuring that I remain silent.

Once he has my undivided attention, he leans back, gesturing for me to get up. With a glance, I see his sleeping bag rolled up and his backpack is bulging but fastened. The hot plate is still sitting in the center of the room. I throw my duffel bag over my shoulder, check my shoelaces, and bundle up my sleeping bag. Duo gestures for me to follow his lead.

We leave the fuel-cell-powered heater and hot plate behind.

Surprisingly, Duo doesn’t head for either the front or back doors. He ducks into the room across the hall, crossing the threshold without a sound. Its single, poorly boarded and cracked window faces the backyard of rotting tiles and the drab privacy fence. We wedge ourselves into the corners on either side of the door, leaving it slightly ajar. I still have no idea what’s going on, but Duo’s eyes are sharp as he divides his attention between the window and the hallway.

I count off eighty-four seconds of silence before the soft sound of the backdoor opening whispers through the house. Nearly soundless footsteps advance down the hall. Two sets. Neither Duo nor I have to shift to ready ourselves for a fight; our arms are loose, our feet braced and knees slightly bent. A knife gleams in Duo’s right hand. I soundlessly pull mine from its sheathe.

The trespassers approach the bathroom first; the slight squeal of the door opening is what Duo had been waiting for. He nods and we dash from the room on quiet feet toward the open backdoor. Duo leaps to the left. Lashes out against the side of the house with his right hand, smashing the hilt of the knife into something at approximately head-height. He leans forward and I scan the back area behind the house as he lowers an unconscious teenager to the ground.

I join Duo against the wall as the water shuts off and one of the guys inside the house calls softly, “Yo, Timer. Eyes open.”

Duo doesn’t bother to signal for me to move. He sprints for the rear wall of the privacy fence and pulls himself over it. I’m half a heartbeat behind him. I don’t stop moving until he does. Duo closes the backdoor of the house that shares the same fence, spinning to put his eye to the peephole and gripping the handle of the broken lock with sure fingers.
I turn to watch his back.

And find myself staring into the wide eyes of a startled, grubby child. He or she — I’m honestly unsure which — pulls a homemade shiv from the oversized sleeve of the ratty smock hanging from his or her thin shoulders.

I lower my knife hand and slowly shake my head.

The child pauses, looks from me to Duo and back again, then dashes quietly into the depths of the house.

Before I can call Duo’s attention, he’s opening the door and his left hand is clamped around my arm, hauling me into the backyard again, shoving me into a corner of the fence and squeezing into the narrow space beside me. We breathe side-by-side. Listen.

And then, astonishingly, Duo jumps back over the fence and into the yard we’d just fled. I hurry after him, thinking of the teenaged boy Duo had knocked out and left slumped beside the backdoor, but he—“Timer”—is gone. Frowning, I end up ducking back into the house. Why? For the hot plate? It’s not worth the risk.

But as we reenter the room that we’d bunked in, I see that it’s gone. Duo creeps over to the window, moving slowly so as not to catch the attention of anyone studying the house from the street. I remain by the door, poised to strike if an intruder enters.

Two minutes pass.

Five.

Ten.

There’s a shout in the distance, perhaps two houses down. I tense at the loud patter of running footsteps in the backyard and from the street as gang members rush to converge on their target. I don’t ask Duo why we’re moving toward the front door. I don’t try to stop him from heading in the opposite direction of the commotion. Cries and thuds, pleas and crashes. Jeering calls from at least six voices.

We could stop them. I’m sure that Duo and I could stop them… if he hadn’t just detoxed and if I had familiarized myself with the terrain, it would have been the matter of a moment. Duo and I had been Gundam pilots, soldiers, fighters. We’ll never not be those things.

The eerie, windless silence of the surrounding neighborhood carries the sound of a merciless beating to us. When my steps slow, Duo dodges back and grabs my wrist, bodily hauling me away.

I have to choose.

I choose Duo.

But that doesn’t stop me from wishing that my hands were wrapped around the controls of my Gundam just once more.

We run. We run as effectively and decisively as we had hidden. I think of Duo’s motto. I think I’m beginning to understand why Duo had worn a grin while Deathscythe had sliced its way through enemy lines: finally, he’d been given the means to stand up for himself and the things that had mattered to him.
It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this helpless in broad daylight.

As soon as Duo and I reach a lamp-lined street, we tuck our knives away, slowing to a casual stroll. Two blocks later, Duo turns into the marketplace, the covered arcade that I’d spotted the day before yesterday. The vid phone booth is still unmarked and unmolested.

As are we.

Duo weaves his way along the mostly clean street, holding open the door to a coin laundromat for me. “Have you got two creds?” he asks quietly.

I crouch down on the pretense of retying my shoelaces. When I stand, I surreptitiously press the cash into his palm, as wary as ever of being watched. Duo heads for the counter and smiles at the staff behind the barred service window. He angles his body so that his gaze sweeps the room with a glance. He’s watching the door behind me. Watching my back. Still.

Watching Duo’s back should have been my job, not vice versa. How had things gotten turned around so quickly?

The credits pass through the exchange slot and tokens emerge.

“You got anything you want washed?” he asks, still not meeting my gaze.

I nod and dig several items from my bag. I’ll have to remove the cash lightly sewn into the pant legs of the jeans I’m wearing before the next laundry day. If Duo and I are still on this colony then.

I can’t help but feel envious as the machine’s basin begins to fill with sudsy water. Instead of wasting energy resenting the fact that I have to settle for sanitize gel in order to clean myself, I take a seat beside the chair that Duo had chosen. I stare at the front door of the facility and ignore my hollow belly.

“Roamers?” I ask quietly.

“Yup,” he answers, his tone far too light given what we’d just done. What we hadn’t done. “Putting a beauty on their territory.”

“A beauty?” I echo, still not understanding why we hadn’t interceded.

“Y’know. Sweeping the houses. Combing the streets. That sort of shit.”

“There was at least one little kid in the house behind ours.”

“Yeah, I’m not surprised.” At my look, he elaborates, “There was a decent chair next to the peephole.”

A chair. An impromptu step ladder, he means.

Duo lets out a long breath. “I sure hope they got out before a scout found ‘em.”

“What happens if I scout finds kids on their territory?”

“Depends.”

I wait for him to explain.

With palpable reluctance, he does: “The lucky ugly ones are taken into the gang.”
“And the unlucky ones?”

“Sold to skin hunters. Slave trade.”

My thoughts freeze even as my instincts rise, pushing me into the next level of wariness without the aid of the zipline hidden in the lining of my bag. “Is that why we didn’t stick around?”

He nods once, abrupt and furious. “I didn’t recognize them and if they’ve got sweet darts or slow jo, we wouldn’t stand a chance.” He leans forward and, bracing his elbows on his knees, glares at the washing machine. I can hear our clothes sloshing around and around, tumbling and splashing.

“Once we’re done here, I’m taking you back to the spaceport,” Duo tells me.

I shake my head. “No.”

“You don’t know what you’re up against here, man.”

“So tell me.” I glare at him. “Because I’m not leaving you here.”

“Stubborn ass,” he mutters. His shoulders slump in the instant before he leans back, slouching down in his borrowed chair. His hand, when he reaches up to rub at the crown of his head and scratch his scalp, is shaking.

It goes without saying that Duo is still weak from detox. It’s also clear that he’d taken up sentry duty while I’d been sleeping. I imagine him methodically pacing the hallway of the house, going from window to window, door to door, watching and listening. My throat tightens at the thought of him foregoing his own immediate and undetected escape in order to wake me.

“Thanks for taking point earlier,” I tell him.

Finally, he looks at me. “A shit lotta good it did the poor sonuvabitch who took the blame.”

I look away.

No, Duo hasn’t forgotten about the person we’d left behind at the mercy of the gang. I can see it in his eyes. I’d never expected to return to living like this when I’d set out to find him: feeling powerless to ever hope of changing a world that is brutally unfair.

I think of pacifists like Relena Darlian-Peacecraft.

The gangs and slave traders on this colony would chew her ilk up and spit them back out.

I ask, “Why are the middle of the mains considered safe?”


I recite, “Don’t draw your weapons on a scout if you can help it and watch your back for his roamers.” I shrug. “That’s all I know.”

“Needful hatch,” Duo tells me and then explains in response to my confusion, “good advice.” He clears his throat. “The lit streets are safe, for the most part, because the colony police get rid of anyone who rusters folk where they can be identified by eye witnesses and cameras.”

My brows lift in astonishment. “The police actually have some affect on the crime here?”

Duo snorts. “The police practically run the crime here. Nothing happens in dark alleys that the cops
don’t get a cut from. Not that they need it. They work for the real bosses: the import-export tycoons.”

But when it comes to numbers, stark and simple, I’m sure that the rich could be easily overwhelmed. “The gangs go along with this?”

I find myself fascinated by Duo’s irreverently playful smirk. Hatred gleams in his eyes. “The last time anyone tried to get the gangs organized, the colony was slammed with a virus. People with enough money to afford the cure avoided a messy, gruesome death. Coincidence? I think not.”

My shock has me staring at him hard.

“Of course now they’re stuck with an entire population of bitter, hard-ass thugs who are immune to the first wave.” I don’t ask if this group includes Duo himself, but he shrugs anyway. “There’s no proof, but just about anyone old enough to make any real trouble remembers the plague.”

He continues quietly, “It’s in the best interests of the wealthy to keep the lower class busy fighting among themselves. On these dark streets, if you ain’t got a gang to defend or avenge you, you’re done.” Spreading his arms wide in a mocking gesture of good faith, he concludes, “Welcome to my home sweet home, Tro. Are you sure you wanna stay for the full tour?”

“Why are you here?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“If you leave with me, I’ll agree to that.”

“Fuck all, you’re stubborn.”

Cathy would second that. “You promised me a week. It doesn’t have to be here.”

“Yes. It does.”

I don’t ask him why. I already had and he’d answered quite clearly. I don’t enjoy repeating myself. “What’s next, then?”

He huffs out a tired breath. “Stick to the outskirts of public spaces. Keep an eye out for watchers. Secure another place to rest.”

I think of the cash I’d brought with me. It’s not enough to cover the expense of a hotel room for the both of us for the remainder of the week. Besides, I am not ready for Duo to know that I’d lied to him about my financial situation. “I need to find work.”

“Copy that. It’s on the fucking agenda.”

I keep my mouth shut as he sighs and pulls himself out of his chair, meandering around the room in a bored swagger. He comes to a halt in front of a message board. Skims the layers of tacked up notices. Gestures for me to join him.

“Look it here. Found the perfect job for you, man.” He taps the thin sheet of printed plastic, smirking at me as I reach his side. The ad is far from new — the ink has flecked off in places and the plastic sheet itself is cracked from age — but I obligingly read it anyway.

“Hm. Interesting.”

Duo just about chokes on a bark of laughter. “Intere—are you kidding?”
“I’ve never been a kid.”

“That I actually believe.”

I nod toward the ad, anticipating his shock and bluster with relish. “What’s not to like?”

“You think working in a pet store—cleaning gerbil cages all day and vacuuming up fish turds—would be interesting?”

I stare him down. “Doesn’t everybody?”

Duo smirks and shakes his head. “You are seriously creeping me out, man.”

“It’s always the quiet ones.”

Duo almost chuckles. “You’ve got that right.”

We stare at the board, and I quickly locate an alternative. “How about this one?”

The clean, crisp, white sheet of printed plastic reads:

Help wanted! New church to be built in Laurel Heights from mid-February, AC 198. Workers needed. Previous experience in construction a plus! If interested, please contact...

“Reverend Jamesson?” Duo murmurs with a startled air.

I keep my attention focused on Duo’s face, reading his reaction. There is definite tension there — a conflict of interests flashing in his eyes — but I’m at a loss as to exactly why Duo is torn over this particular ad. I have the sense that he’s recalling the fate of Maxwell Church, but as I know none of the specifics, I can’t begin to guess what he’s thinking. Duo stares at the little square of typical, colony stationary as if willing it to do something. Either disappear before his very eyes or offer divine guidance.

Personally, the opportunity it presents has my endorsement. Falling into bed after a physically exhausting day of manual labor might help his nightmares fade, or at least not gain as much power. That’s why I’d brought up construction work in the first place. But it’s not as if I can force him.

Well. Maybe I can. Maybe I will have to. I’ve manipulated my fair share of people in my life. Growing up among violent adult men that I could neither run nor hide from, I’d learned very quickly how to redirect attention from myself. Manipulation is the skin I’m most comfortable wearing. I’ve never had the need or opportunity to do that to Duo, though I’d used it for his sake as well as Wufei’s and Heero’s when I’d been an officer with OZ. The possibility of nudging Duo towards a specific act or outcome awakens twin sensations of trepidation and excitement. Trepidation because Duo will vanish for good if my maneuvers are discovered. Excitement because it’s been so long since I’ve felt that kind of power.

Duo shakes his head at the board. Crossing his arms over his chest, he grumbles, “You’d think they’d learn.”

“Learn what, exactly?”

“That ‘God forsaken’ ain’t a term of endearment.” Spinning on his heel, Duo returns to the waiting area and plops down in the chair he’d abandoned, angling himself away from both me and my previously occupied seat to watch the passers-by through the lint-speckled store front windows. I give him his space and read through the rest of the ads. Some are clearly older than the undoubtedly
expired pet store position. I find it hard to believe that a pet store could survive longer than a few harrowing months on this colony.

When the machine blares out a flat-toned buzzer, Duo pulls our clean and dry clothing out. He folds up and stows his own garments one at a time, leaning out of the way for me to reach in to fish out mine. There are no baskets or carts, no waist-high tables for sorting. The other customers barely glance our way.

It’s nearly lunchtime according to the shadowless angle of the colony illumination. A glance at my watch confirms it. As I had skipped a number of meals in the last forty-eight hours, I don’t voice any objections when Duo grunts out a single word: “Lunch.”

We carefully climb the fire escape of a nearby office building and Duo pulls the bread and depleted package of peanut butter out of his backpack. The remains of the loaf is a bit lopsided and even drier than it had been before, but I voice no complaints. We eat a pair of sandwiches apiece. We finish the jug of refiltered water I’d stashed in my duffel.

Duo’s eyes scan the dilapidated homes in the distance.

“How do you choose?” I ask, assuming he’s hunting for suitable lodgings.

He gestures to figures moving along a distant street.

“Roamers?” I guess.

He nods. “Going through their territory. They don’t bother every day. It’s more like regular maintenance than doing business. After they pass through, it’ll be anywhere from three to seven rotations before they’re back the same way.”

“Where’s Laurel Heights?”

With a huff at my obvious preference for the church construction job, he flicks his wrist in the direction of a neighborhood a few streets over from the gang he’d been watching. Laurel Heights is indistinguishable from every other rundown area outside of downtown and the wealthy “highland.” I don’t see a new church-like structure anywhere. There’s a half-demolished plot. Some movement. What looks like a crane with a set of hydraulic pinchers relentlessly picking apart the remaining buildings.

Pointing, I ask, “Won’t the local gang object?”

I can tell Duo doesn’t want to talk about the church. That’s fine. I learn more about him when he’s irritated than when he’s a smiling, laid-back colony boy, which is just a mask, anyway. The more I learn, the better my chances will be of changing his mind in five days’ time.

“It’s on a safeline. They might lose territory when more folk move into the homes around the church and property values go up, but they’ll also have better pickings.” I glance at Duo and he explains, “Outright home invasion and theft or first dibs on roadside trash. If you’ve got something you don’t want anymore, you set it out at the curb. Somebody’ll take it away for you.”

The mention of unwanted items brings to mind the one thing we hadn’t been able to take with us as we’d fled. “I’m sorry about the heater. The hot plate.”

“You bet your ass you are. I’m a helluva cook.”

I feel myself smile. “Clearly, I don’t know what I’m missing.”
He chuckles, his eyes sparkling with humor as he looks my way. His gaze lingers on my smile which, oddly enough, doesn’t fade under the scrutiny. “Eh, don’t worry about it. Picked it up at the recycle center.”

I assume he’d “picked it up” without paying for it. The thought does nothing to banish my quiet amusement.

“But that’s why we can’t go back to the same house for the night,” he volunteers. “The roamers will be nearby, waiting to see if whoever left it behind is coming back for it.”

I frown. “I thought… they’d assume the person they caught was the owner.”

“If we’re real lucky, yeah.” Duo turns to face me fully, stares at me hard. Both dark eyes lock onto my expression. “How about it, Trowa? Do you feel lucky?”

I hold his gaze, undeterred by the sharp edges of his rage shimmering in the air between us. So this is Duo’s infamous Shinigami.

Well, minus the smear of peanut butter on his cheek.

Reaching out, I scrape it off of his skin with the edge of my thumb nail, noting the fact that he could use a shave. I probably could, too.

He blinks, startled by my touch, and his banked fury vanishes.


Duo’s lips twitch with a near-smile. He looks away and sighs wistfully. “Aw, you’re no fun.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

This time, he doesn’t stop the grin from curving his mouth. “Oh, yeah. Me, too.”

Chapter End Notes

As I was reworking the colony scenes in "Shinigami Sleeps," I asked myself what kind of place could produce the Duo we met during the series. This chapter (and many that follow) illustrates my take on it. None of this is shown in the series or Episode Zero. HOWEVER, the plague happened. Why and when and how devastating it was are all open to interpretation.

Trowa’s past with the mercenaries will be explored, too, slowly but surely.
A Night in an Attic

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Suicidal thoughts (continuing), reference to child abuse (non-specific), ogling of bare ass (whoo-hoo!!), language (of course)


Music rec for the res-den: “Radioactive” by Imagine Dragons (if you don't know this song, you NEED TO CHECK IT OUT)
Music rec for Duo: “Staying Up” by the Neighbourhood (they have some amazing songs on the same album, FYI)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

… DUO …

“I need to make a call to Earth. Five minutes,” Trowa, my self-appointed shadow, informs me.

“A call you don’t have to pay for,” I not-ask.

His brows go up. “If neither I nor the circus have to pay for it, that’ll get you a cup of coffee with dinner.”

Now that’s the kind of incentive that interests me.

Twenty minutes later, Trowa’s rejoining me on the fire escape. During the evening rush hour from five to six p.m., you can pretty much do the tango in a tutu and no one will notice. Unless your dumb ass is blocking the exit.

“How’s Cathy?” I inquire. See? I can be politely interested in other people’s personal biz.

Trowa chuckles. Actually chuckles. Who the hell knew he had it in him? “Alarmed.”

At my prompting look, he elaborates, “She was startled to get a call from the L2 cluster.”

I snicker. “That’s ‘the L2 cluster fuck,’” I correct him.

“My mistake.”

It very well could be. Instead, I tease, “See, what you meant to say just now was ‘my treat.’”

Trowa rolls his eyes at me. Just, hold on a sec and lemme repeat that: Trowa rolls his eyes at me. Holy hell.

“Yes,” he drawls, “feeding time. I know. Pick our poison.”

Leaping from the lowest rung of the fire escape ladder, I land with a thud on the closed dumpster lid and jump to the grimy pavement. When Trowa lands next to me, I hear myself say, “Y’know, it’s
probably for the best that you and I never partnered up during the war or not a whole fuck of a lot would’ve gotten done.”

He nods, a serious look in his eyes. “Chess. So exciting. I don’t know how we managed to stop playing the first time.”

I bark out a laugh as we step onto the busy main drag. I remind him, “The Earth was about to be destroyed. Or something like that.”

“Right. Now I remember.”

He follows me — blindly, I might add — onto a side street that is also a safeline and through a battered, metal doorway. The interior is dark and the floor has probably never been cleaned, but the bartender makes a mean casserole. So long as you’re not too picky about what’s in it.

We place our orders and pay up-front.

“Fifteen minutes,” the proprietor grunts.

I tilt my head toward one of the vacant billiard tables. Quirk a brow. Trowa coughs up a cred from somewhere on his person — I still haven’t figured out exactly where it all comes from which is leaving me all kinds of impressed — and we start a game.

The billiard balls break apart with a satisfying crack! that resonates through the tiny, claustrophobic pub. Trowa steps back, cue stick held lightly, as I work the table. He doesn’t congratulate me when I sink my first, second, or third shot. I don’t bother to gloat. Once upon a time, I’d gotten my rocks off by blasting mobile suits, infiltrating OZ bases, and sabotaging space stations. Knocking a ball from one side of a table to the other with the end of a synthetic-wood stick isn’t all that much of a challenge. Or an accomplishment.

Several patrons wander in as the work-day rush hour ebbs. Middle-aged single dudes, mostly. I track them. If someone’s got a hole in their pocket, I won’t pass up the chance to lighten their, er, financial burdens. So to speak. But I don’t see any marks that are worth the risk.

Besides, I’m distracted. It’s Trowa’s fault. And that cute fucking curve of his mouth that deepens increment-by-increment toward a true smile with every shot I sink. As flattering as it is to have his attention all to myself, I’m done with being ogled. It’s time for him to bend his ass over this table for a while.

I miss my sixth shot, stepping back and answering Trowa’s disbelieving look — is he doing that snooty arched eyebrow thing with both or just the one that I can see? — with a lazy shrug.

My grin widens as he leans over the worn, green felt and takes careful aim. Pretty sure I’m not the only one checking the fit of his jeans, but whatever. The view is free of charge.

Note: I do not, for one second, believe that I’m not gonna end up paying for it later. I know I will. Trowa hasn’t forgotten our deal. Five rotations left ‘til I crack open this bottle of whiskey. I wonder if what I’d bought is gonna be enough to dull the pain.

Trowa brushes past me and the air he stirs up smells like him. A little sweaty, dusty, musky. Familiar. Safe.

God damn him for showing up when he had.

God damn me for putting my plans on hold.
God damn this is gonna hurt no matter what I do. So I guess I might as well enjoy it. Let him think his plan to show me that life’s worth living is working. What he doesn’t get is that I know life is worth living. I just don’t deserve the privilege.

When he leans down for his fifth shot, he glances my way. I can’t see it — that stupid hair of his is damn good cover — but I sense it. He hesitates. I eye the table and the shot he has lined up. Looks pretty similar to the one I’d intentionally missed. It’s certainly not that difficult of an angle to manage.

But he fucks it up.

I guess he’s decided that it’s my turn again.

My grin is wry as I re-chalk the end of my cue. “That angle gets you, too, huh?”

“Every time.”

*And just how often have you played pool, Tro?* I don’t ask. The answer won’t matter. It’s the tone of his voice, the look in his eyes, that’ll do all the talking and I’m not in the zone to be a good listener right now.

I’m suddenly not in the mood to be much of anything except pissed off. At him. At everyone on this fucking colony. At the whole damn universe. At God. At myself. That last one, especially.

What am I thinking—playing pool, watching Trowa’s ass, trading looks like any of this will matter in five days? It won’t. It fucking won’t.

I’m up; it’s my turn at the table. My turn in this idiotic, time-wasting game. To hell with the rules.

I miss my next shot.

Trowa makes no comment. And promptly misses his shot, too.

What the hell? I stare at him. He looks back at me, all Mister Unassuming and Cool.

I nail a side pocket shot and miss the next one.

Ditto for him.

I refuse to be the dumbass who calls bullshit on shenanigans. I lean back against the edge of the table, cue threaded through my fingers behind my arched back. Line up, shoot, and knock a bouncing number twelve ball into the corner pocket. Promptly followed by the cue ball, ending my turn. But my showmanship has already earned me a wolf whistle and a couple of claps from some bored guys at the bar.

Trowa walks up to me. When I refuse to budge, he leans across my front and collects the cue chalk. Stands very close. Ignores our audience and watches me intently as he wiggles the dented, blue cube over the tip of the stick. Then he sets the chalk back down *precisely* the same way he’d collected it. In the same spot, even.

Sonuvabitch.

He chooses his next shot. Mimics my showy pose. Snaps the cue stick smartly. The cue ball hits its target with enough force to send the ball bouncing into the nearest pocket.
What an asshole. If he hadn’t already bought me dinner and promised me coffee, I’d leave. Probably.

The bartender smacks our meals down on the counter across from where our sleeping bags are propped up on our seats. Spitely, I flick the eight ball, spinning it in a wide, curving path across the felt and into the pocket directly in front of Trowa.

Game over.

I round the table on a heading for our seats and the steaming whatever that’s also being sat down in front of the other half dozen dudes in the place. Trowa holds out a hand and I stop.

“Cue stick,” he says, tone flat and expression revealing nothing.

I hand it over. Slide into my seat. Make myself as comfortable as I can be with my sleeping bag slung over my shoulder, my backpack in my lap, and Trowa at my right elbow. I dig in. Yup, the casserole is crap, but it’s filling and it’s got genuine dehydrated meat and vegetables in it. Anyway, I’m here for the coffee.

Trowa waits for me to push my empty plate away and stare at him before he orders one cup, then slides it in my direction. Maybe he figures that, given the quality of the food, the coffee won’t be much to write home about.

I’ve never had a worse-tasting cup of joe in my life, but the shit is strong.

Hallelujah.

It gives me enough oomph to get us out of sight before the night cycle sets in. Tonight’s house has a small, square floorplan with two stories and what could be an attic. I signal for Trowa to stay low as we dash across the side yard and crouch beside the kitchen door. I try the knob; as I’d expected, the lock is broken. Most are in the res-den. I swing inside with Trowa on my heels and take cover beside the cabinets. Signaling for Trowa to stay put, I investigate the premises, startling a feral cat and a party of cockroaches. The bio-scanners at the docks still manage to keep the mice and rats out, but cockroaches have been a fact of life here since as far back as I can remember.

Hell, a couple of ‘em might have been included with dinner.

The house is empty of humans, anyway, and the water lines have been shut off. Well, it’s only for one night, then we should be able to head back to the other place. I’m not really keen on blocking us in on the attic, but the trapdoor and foldable steps make it easily defensible. There are windows facing the street and side yards. The casing is age-rotted enough to give way with a strong kick. The sad excuses for second floor window boxes are placed close enough to give us something to climb down. Or we could pull ourselves up to the roof.

I go back for Trowa. We climb up to the attic just as the light fades to a dull yellow. I use a roll of twine that I always keep in a handy pocket to tie the trapdoor steps to the rafters. I’d left the string dangling in the second floor hallway; there’s no point in giving away the fact that someone is likely up here. Doesn’t matter how hard a visitor pulls on it — the trapdoor won’t budge. Hopefully, any shelter-seeking or skin-hunting trespassers will assume that the hinges are gummed shut.

As there’s no streetlamp nearby, half broken or otherwise, we couldn’t have used the heater even if we’d had it. The glow would have been visible for blocks.

I roll out my sleeping bag. Trowa does likewise. Right next to mine.
I pull mine a couple of hand-widths away. He pushes his across the distance until they touch again.

“Afraid the bugs’ll get you?” I drawl.

“Absolutely. Protect me and I’ll buy you more coffee.”

Fuck it. “Fine. Get some rest.”

He shakes his head. “You’ve been up longer. I should take first watch.”

I snort. “You didn’t have coffee. I’ll be awake for another couple of hours easy.”

With a soft sigh, he loosens the laces on his boots and toes them off. Cleans his bare feet with sanitize gel. Puts on a fresh pair of socks. Wiggles into his sleeping bag. “Wake me when you start getting tired.”

I have no intention of doing that, so I don’t bother to promise him.

“Duo.”

“What?” I hiss.

“You’ve seen what Cathy’s like when she’s angry.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, you’re going to have to try a lot harder than this to get me to back off.”

“Go the fuck to sleep.”

Trowa chuckles. I shake my head in wonderment at the sound. And then everything gets quiet. Real quiet. I listen to his breaths. I think about his pointless determination to save me. I wish it were possible, for his sake. He’s gonna be so pissed when it doesn’t work. But I’d warned him. I’d fucking warned him that it wouldn’t make a difference.

I stare out from one window for five minutes, counting off the seconds in my head, reciting hymns by moving my lips in silence. Then I check the other windows. Back to the one with the view of the street. Shadows move in the darkness, but no one approaches the house. Why would they? It’s virtually identical to the other dozen or so in the immediate area.

The coffee and the hymns and my own stubbornness keep me going until well past midnight. When the cockroaches venture too close, I flick them away. Then, thinking of Trowa, I settle down on my sleeping bag, checking to make sure nothing small and six-legged is crawling over his face or anything.

I stare at him, at both closed eyes. The utter stillness of his lashes in the light of the rising artificial moon.

In a moment of childish stupidity, I wish for ignorance. Blissful ignorance. Bliss…

Hmm.

I roll over for what seems like the hundredth time and settle deeper into the warm cocoon of man-made fabric. Sleep. Hell, yes. Sleep is awesome. Jesus, it feels so damn nice to just lie here. Like it’s been for-fucking-ever since I’ve just snuggled down under the covers until God knows when...
My eyes fly open.
The attic is bright with daylight.

Daylight.

Christ, what the hell time is it?

I sit up, blinking in confusion. Had I actually slept? Without screaming my vocal chords raw?

I clear my throat just to be sure. My throat is dry, but not sore. Not even a little bit. I can’t believe it.

A subtle movement on the other side of the room has me reaching for my knife, but it’s only Trowa. He’s crouching near a side yard window, shoulders pressed against the moldering wall. He looks away from an acute-angle view of the backyard and spears me with his stare. Awareness rolls over me like an icy blast from an airlock.

I’d slept and Trowa is still here.

It takes me an embarrassingly long while to wrangle my disjointed thoughts into something resembling coherence.

I must not have dreamed.

How is that even possible?

Trowa looks pointedly at his watch. “Good... ten o’clock in the morning.”

I gawk in response to the softly spoken greeting. “Shit. Man. I never sleep this late.”

The corner of Trowa’s mouth curves upward. “You must have needed the rest.”

I roll myself up onto my knees, wincing as my muscles adjust to the new posture. Damn. I scrub my palms briskly over my face, trying to kick start my brain.

“What’s new in the big, bad world outside?” I say instead of apologizing for being a lazy ass.

Trowa’s reply consists of a one-shouldered shrug. “One stray cat. Two women fighting over a blond wig. A scout hassling a homeless kid.”

“The kid get away OK?” I shouldn’t care, but… damn it, I haven’t managed to forget my own encounters with scouts as a kid. Moments where my fate had been balanced on a knife’s edge.

“Yeah. His gang showed up, ran circles around the moron, and vanished.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding.

“Where do they come from? The homeless kids?”

I reach up to the rafters for my backpack. I’d hung it there last night in the hopes of deterring hungry six-legged adventurers. “Most of ‘em come from the factory district.”

“How much worse are the conditions there?”

“Most folk would say they aren’t. At least if you’re a factory worker, your family has a roof over
their head, stable income, and police protection.” I pull out the bread. It has a couple of fuzzy white spots, but Trowa can pick them off if he’s fussy. The peanut butter appears unmolested. Thank God.

“What’s the catch?” Trowa asks.

I smirk. Yeah, he’d picked up on that. “If you work in the factory, your ass belongs to the owner. You shop at the factory store. You see the doc at the factory clinic. You spend your whole life in that overpriced shithole and you die in debt. Unless you bite the big one in an industrial accident, you live to a ripe old age. If you screw up — get caught stealing or some shit, they’ll kick you out with nothing but the clothes on your back. You gotta pay to get past the guards and back into the compound.”

“So, these kids are all factory orphans?”

“Yeah. The ones no one would take in. Or the ones that were ‘adopted’ for all the sickest reasons and were brave enough to run away.”

When Trowa’s eyes narrow and his jaw clenches, I realize I’m staring. I quickly relocate my stare to the food laid out on my sleeping bag, my stomach twisting. I grab for my sanitize gel and clean my hands.

Trowa sums up in a hard tone, “The rich own the factories and control the ports, set the taxes and minimum wage. The police work for them. The workers are slaves. And I’m guessing the res-den is a kind of no-man’s land of outlaws and outcasts.”

“Pretty much. What there is of the middle class sticks to downtown where they can give visitors a couple dozen city blocks of normal life.”

“Normal life,” Trowa repeats in a tone that might have almost been a sneer. “That explains why the front desk clerk at the R&B Hotel and Hersh from the launders are running a racket. Targeting visitors that no one will miss in a hurry.”

“What line are they using?” I ask and shake my head when he tells me of the colony “tour” he’d been offered. “That is normal life here. Sad but true.”

He turns back to the window. Glaring, this time.

I unwrap my cook-set from my clean laundry. Thank God for my extra set of clothing, otherwise I’d make enough noise to be a walking dinner bell. Using the pathetically dull paring knife, I spread some peanut butter on one of the worst of the slices, pinching off the fuzzy bits more for something to do rather than out of disgust.

“Has it always been this way?” Trowa wants to know.

“More or less.”

His silence presses against my skin. Smothering.

I snap.

“Y’wanna know what pisses me off?” He attention sharpens on me, though he doesn’t answer. But, hey, it’s cool. The question is rhetorical. I snarl, “Wufei’s home colony, which had every damn thing going for it, didn’t make it through the war, but this piece of shit is still here.”
For a long moment, Trowa doesn’t say anything. Nothing at all. But then he murmurs, “Wufei would say that means there’s still hope.”

The fucking nerve of him. Trowa, I mean.

And also Wufei because, God damn it, Trowa has totally knocked the dude’s number.

I throw back my head and laugh. Dark and hard and slightly hysterical. “He totally would say that too, the self-righteous ass. Even after seeing every shitty, seedy underside of this hellhole.”

Trowa shrugs and moves away from the window. “I guess that’s why they gave him a badge.”

I snicker. “Not like it’ll get a whole lot done here.” Except attract all the wrong kinds of attention.

Trowa sorts out his own cook-set and fixes himself a sandwich. “What will?”

“What will—what?” I check. “Get shit done?”

Mouth full, he nods.

I shake my head. I don’t want to think about this. I don’t want to get involved. I don’t have the time. But, damn it, I do remember tales and rumors of a time when things had been better. Not perfect — not even close — but better.

My response is so long in coming that I startle him. Or maybe it’s my answer that does the trick.


There’s a reason why the Maxwell Church ruins are neutral territory in a place where every street corner is a battleground.

I look toward the front window as I volunteer, “There used to be an orphanage here run by a cloister and convent. They took in all the homeless kids from the factory district and found homes for them on other colonies through the church network. They gave free medical aid to anyone — roammers or rebels — who needed it. Meals and beds for the homeless. And then the Alliance moved in. It was supposed to be good for the economy, but it was only good for the fat assholes on the Crest. Church shipments were confiscated. Volunteers were forced out until…” I stop. I have to stop. I can’t talk about this. Too many questions. Too many terrible answers. “The church was wiped out.”

Trowa pops the last unpalatable bite of sandwich into his mouth and chews carefully. We’re all out of refiltered water, so choking to death on dry, sticky food is a legitimate concern. He takes his time watching me and not speaking, but I can fucking hear the question he doesn’t ask.

I shake my head on a long sigh. “Jamesson is just one man, Tro. It’s not enough.”

“It’s a start.”

My jaw clenches. I eat my damn sandwich. We finish the loaf. There’s a little peanut butter left over. I fumble for my bag, scrounging around inside it with one hand while the other pulls my braid over my shoulder and slips the black elastic off of the end. Sorting out the mess that my hair had become overnight only takes a few minutes. I scrub sanitizer into my scalp with a grimace. Not that I think anyone is particularly fond of this shit, but damn do I hate it.

Almost as much as I hate people gaping at me while my hair is loose. I frown at Trowa’s back as he changes his underwear and then pulls the same jeans back on for the second day in a row.
Heero hadn’t given me this much privacy. Hell, one time he’d barged into the dorm showers just to tell me we had a mission. After I’d gone through all the trouble of sneaking out of my room after curfew so I’d have the place to myself, too. Heero Yuy, also known as Mister Insensitive.

Not Trowa, though. He’d turned around as soon as I’d pulled out a comb. I could have done likewise instead of letting him give me a crowd-pleasing view of his bare ass. But, hell, you only live once, right? I almost wish Trowa had been the first Gundam pilot I’d met; Heero hadn’t been nearly as obliging. As an added bonus: until recently, Trowa had been a professionally employed acrobat. I can now vouch that he’s got nothing to be ashamed of in that department.

I quickly rebraid my hair and sniff at my shirt. Eh, whatever. It’s passable. We clean up and pack up. Trowa doesn’t ask where we’re going. Not because he’s too dumb to worry about it; Tro’s one helluva smart guy. I know why he doesn’t ask: trust.

It’s the one and only thing that can break through the space-grade shuttle porthole that I look out at the rest of the world through. It’s been a real long time since I’ve felt a warm stirring in my chest. The touch of someone else’s faith in me.

My hands fist, but I don’t punch him. Somehow. I don’t grab his wrinkled, slept-in shirt and pull him close, either. Go me.

I drag him from one construction site to the next, doing my smiling, easy-going thing for one foreman after another: “Good afternoon, sir! My buddy and I are colony-hopping. Looking for a bit of work for our next fare, y’know? You need a couple extra hands today?”

“Sorry, kid. No. We’re on a tight budget. Try the site at…”

The first time I hear the spiel, I take it at face value. By the eighth time, I’m ready to deck someone. To his credit, Trowa doesn’t suggest that I give it a rest.

We stop at a general store for more bread and peanut butter. Refill our jugs of refiltered water. I find a park — or what passes for a park in these parts — and claim a bench. We finish the old peanut butter, chewing and hydrating in silence. The lack of wind means there’s nothing to watch, no movement to idly track. The swing set doesn’t swing. The discarded shreds of plastic wrappers that have snagged on the base of the jungle gym don’t rustle. Trowa has to tilt his head to the side to keep his bangs out of the way as he eats.

Washing the last bites down, we remain side by side. It’s quiet. Companionable. It reminds me of Peace Million when he and I had had one thing in common: neither one of us had known a damn thing about who he really was, deep down.

It’s isolating to think that’s not true anymore.

I look in the direction of the church ruins. I gaze toward the old Alliance base.

God. I’m so tired.

When I force myself to stand, Trowa is right there on my flank, ready to move out. If he knew what I know about me, about the things I’ve done, he wouldn’t be so eager to follow my lead.

Doesn’t matter, though. In under five days, it won’t matter one way or the other.

Trowa says nothing when the site of Reverend Jamesson’s future church comes into view. He just places a hand on my shoulder.
I glance his way. I don’t bother bracing myself for the sight of victory or smugness in his expression. Hell, I knew he wouldn’t dare. Unless he has a death wish. But I’m sure as hell not prepared for his solemn show of solidarity.

His gaze is sincere and searching.

Unsettled, I look away. “Like you said. It’s a start.”

His grip tightens briefly and he drops his hand.

I take a deep breath, summon a wide smile, and step off the street.

Chapter End Notes

The school dorm reference is mostly my invention: Heero never interrupts Duo in the shower to tell him they have a mission. In fact, that this point, Heero and Duo are receiving solo mission assignments from their respective scientists (or someone in the boss’s chair). At least once, their missions are identical and Duo suggests they make a game out of it, saying something like, “Let’s see who completes the mission first.” Anyway, Duo and Heero do attend a prep school together, they go on missions, they play basketball. No shower scenes. The shower scenario is mine.

Church history on the colony is also made-up. To my knowledge, there was never a soup kitchen, free clinic, halfway house, etc. Just a church run by Father Maxwell and Sister Helen.

I have no specific information on Duo’s home colony in the L2 cluster (I don’t even know its designated number/call sign). The theory that the plague was actually meant to be used for the purpose of retaining political power in the face of a possible uprising is my own invention. The social structure, features, culture, shady dealings, drugs, and slang of L2 are also of my own invention.

I’ve based the colony social structure very roughly on feudal Japan (Edo Era) where we have the lords (the colony’s upper class), their retainers or samurai (the colony police), peasants or surfs who are legally bound to the land owned by their lord (on this colony, these would be the factory workers), merchants and craftsmen in large port cities (the downtown middle class on this colony), and the social outcasts who live in villages that are illegal in the sense that they are outside of government regulation, kind of like gypsy camps (these are the gangs of the res-den).

Actually, this is a great opportunity to talk about the Japanese “ninja.” Ninja came from these illegal villages. They were “invisible” people who weren’t given the benefits or protection of mainstream society. Ninjas did not develop a range of skills first and then unleash their badassery on the world; ninjas were mercenaries, so their first priority was to make a living. The demand for spies and assassins pushed these people to develop special skills to get the job done. In contrast, the children (especially the sons) of wealthy land owners were taught “bushido” or “the way of the warrior” from a young age, learning philosophy as well as fighting techniques. In a face-to-face (fair) fight between a samurai and a ninja, the ninja would be toast. That is why ninjas would sneak
around in the dark, stab their victims in the back, choke them with a garrote, or poison
them. But mostly, ninjas were spies and simply watched, listened, and passed on
information to their employer.

Ninja would never allow themselves to be captured alive or recognizable. (You
probably don’t want to know what they’d do to themselves as a last resort.) So, their
history is a really sad one of struggling through life as outcasts, constantly in danger of
being recognized. If a ninja were recognized, the lord he worked for would probably
stop paying him or the lord wouldn’t trust a member of the ninja’s family as a
replacement… and then there’s the possibility of the ninja’s target exacting retribution
on the ninja’s family (who would have no legal recourse or rights). Mr. Manny has
explained it to me this way, so you can imagine why he was vaguely horrified when I
told him that a lot of people (well, people that I went to school with, anyway) in the
States think ninja are "cool."
Duo slowly lowers himself onto his sleeping bag with a groan that speaks of abused muscles and exhaustion.

Recalling the warm welcome we’d found at the site of Reverend Jamesson’s new church in Laurel Heights, I let out a breath in relief. Finally, one damn thing has gone right: Duo and I had found ourselves hired on the spot and had spent over four hours hauling large sections of walls, flooring, and whatnot from several recently demolished houses over to one of four different piles bound for the colony recycle centers. The reverend, a thin man in his thirties, had been thrilled with the noticeable difference we’d made in clearing the plot for the new church. And, evidently, he can’t wait to see us both again at eight o’clock sharp tomorrow morning.

After nearly a week of relative inactivity, my muscles are making their protests felt. I know I’ll be somewhat sore tomorrow.

Duo will undoubtedly be more so. I’m just pleased that I have an excuse to work some of the tension from his muscles before he falls asleep and I’m forced to knead his back and shoulders from awkward angles in the dead of the night. All the while holding my breath and hoping I don’t wake him.

Of course, I haven’t forgotten about his three straight days of dosing up on zipline or eight excruciating waves of detox, but I hear myself tease, “I would’ve thought that salvage and scrap work would keep a body fit.”

“Go piss,” is his muttered response. “I’ve had a rough week… month… life.”

I hum thoughtfully. “Go on.”

“The end.”

I set my duffel bag down and step over. It’s nearly dark outside. The attic windows catch the last of the programmed daylight. I’d assumed we would be heading back to the first house, the one with the flickering streetlamp on the nearby corner and running water, but when I’d asked, “Here again?” Duo had drawled, “Well, if you swear to keep your mouth shut, we can go back to the other place.”
“This is fine,” I’d managed, stunned that Duo was inviting — or had simply resigned himself to — more conversation.

Even now, a vague feeling shimmers over my hands, the back of my neck, the base of my spine. Unease or anticipation. I’ve never had the need to tell them apart before.

My shadow falls over him as I kneel down at his side. Duo’s eyes pop open, his expression more confused than wary. He quirks a brow at me. “What’s up, man?”

“Roll over,” I order, twirling my fingers in a circular gesture.

“What the hell for?”

“So I can smother you in the sleeping bag.”

“Oh. Right. Well, why didn’t you just say so.” Duo closes his eyes, concluding our conversation. Or so he thinks.

His eyes fly open when I reach over and squeeze the muscles on either side of his neck.

“The hell are you doing?” he barks, but makes no move to shove me away.

“I’ll give you three guesses.” While he gives it some thought, I focus on his right shoulder with both hands.

His lashes drift down again. “Um, well, you’re either working your way up to strangling me, or you’re checking for weak points, or…?”

“Let’s go with ‘not strangling you… yet.’”

Duo snorts.

I work his left shoulder for a few minutes and then I repeat, “Roll over.”

“Gimme one good reason.”

I poke him in the armpit. He twitches, eyes opening again. I inquire, “Ticklish?”

“Damn you,” he grumbles with a mild glare. He rolls over with a theatrical grimace. “I don’t need a damn back rub.”

I point out, “You’ll feel worse in the morning if you don’t work the tension out before you go to sleep.”

“Acrobat wisdom?”

I correct him, “Clown.”

“Such a demanding profession.”

“Art form.”

“The art of farting around in make-up.”

“It’s a living.”
Duo chuckles and then he gets very quiet. I’m at the point where his upper back is loose enough to let me guide him through some shoulder and arm stretches when he asks, “You gonna go back? Give the circus another shot?”

“I don’t have any definite plans to.”

“You know I’m waiting for you to tell me why you left.”

“So patiently,” I add dryly.

He rolls his head to the side so I can see his stretchy grin in profile. “And I’m super humble, too. Just ask any one of my millions of fans.”

I grab his arm, looping mine through the crook of his elbow and rolling his upper arm in a series of circles.

“Hm,” he grunts.

“That hurt?”

“No. Feels all right.” From his tone, he’s surprised. Surprised that I’m not hurting him. My jaw clenches. If I hadn’t been so cold and callous to him on X18999, he might have realized sooner that I have no interest in hurting him, that I am his friend.

Despite Duo’s easy and almost constant presence in my close proximity aboard Peace Million, we hadn’t become friends. Before the Zero System had unlocked my memories, I’d hardly been in any sort of condition to participate in getting to know someone. Not when I’d had so little to offer of myself. Duo hadn’t minded, though. He might even have been a little relieved that I’d taken him at face value; is it my imagination that makes me recall his smiles as being softer then? His general distrust of good fortune and his cynical view of human nature a little less sharply defined?

And then, of course, after I’d remembered everything, after the world had jumped into painfully clear focus, we’d roared off into one battle after another. Not much time for friendly overtures. No headspace for them, either. Despite the chess game bringing us to the same table, our thoughts had clearly been elsewhere.

But here and now maybe that’s changing.

God, I hope so. I may not know much about Duo, but I do know that he’ll never leave a friend behind. I think of the deadline; I have four days to tether him, somehow, someway, to something or someone. Even if that something is our friendship.

I’ve never tried to make a friend before. It’s harder than it seems. Especially when the other guy is determined to keep you at a safe distance.

I doubt that there is such a thing when it comes to anyone who has flown a Gundam.

I carefully lay his arm down, stand, step over his legs, and settle myself on his other side. He hums on a soft sigh as I work the opposite arm, stretching his shoulder and bicep. I watch him, studying the weave of his braid, the line of skin along the back of his waist where his shirt has ridden up, the way the fingers of his other hand twitch in time with the slow stretches.

Finishing with his arm, I let it rest on the sleeping bag and run my hands over his back one more time, checking for new tender spots. I know I should be using this opportunity to talk, but this is the first time I’ve seen Duo so relaxed. I won’t risk that for the sake of banal dialog.
Silence can draw people together just as effectively as words.

As tempting as it is to keep on with the massage until he tells me to stop, I do have to let him get some actual sleep eventually. I pull away and ask quietly, “How does your back feel now?”

Unable to work up the energy required to enunciate, he gives me a muffled, “Err merm. Mem merrr…”

I nod. “You’re welcome.”

Duo snorts, the ghost of a smirk on his lips. I tug the bunched-up top layer of the sleeping bag out from under his hip and legs, laying it aside on the floor. Then I reach for his boots. Duo twitches at the first touch on his ankle. I unlace his boots. Firmly pull the left one off and then the right. Set them aside to air out. Peel his socks away.

Knowing how necessary it is to take care of one’s feet, I squeeze a dollop of sanitize gel into my palm and work it into his skin, over the tops of his pale, sweaty feet, his heels, soles, between his toes and around nails that are in need of trimming.

His torso is still rising and falling steadily as I fold the sleeping bag over him. Zip it up to his knees.

I allow myself a moment to study the man who’d introduced himself as “J.D.” to the reverend today. As far as I know, Duo has never been shy about using his name. Even during the war. If he hadn’t been such an accomplished hacker, his electronic trail would have practically glowed in the dark. The proverbial neon sign proclaiming, “Duo Maxwell was here.”

I suppose the flash of his suit’s beamscythe had garnered more than enough attention. Duo hadn’t given a damn who had known his name. In fact, he’d seemed almost proud of his actions.

Pride. It’s a concept I’ve never put much of my own energy into, but it’s been the downfall of many. But not Duo. Not yet, at any rate.

I move to the windows, performing my rounds. Watching the shadows and shapes in the darkness as figures prowl the dark streets. The colony “moonlight” won’t provide dim illumination for another hour yet.

The sound of distant shouts seeps through the thin walls of the attic space. Anger and pain. A fight between two roaming gangs.

If someone is killed, what is done with the body?

I’m hesitant to ask, because I think I can guess.

It’s impossible to angle my thoughts away from the chill of deep winter and food stores empty of even expired military rations. I jerk my chin in silent protest, but the memory forms regardless: a raid that I’d been told was necessary for replenishing our supplies. Replenish, yes. Indeed, it had. In the worst way conceivable. But in our terrible hunger, we hadn’t cared. Even death can foster life. I’d learned that lesson on a level few people ever will as I’d licked and sucked the juices from the meat off of my fingers.

Wrapping my arms around my knees, I hug my folded legs to my chest. My stomach doesn’t even roll at the memory. It should, shouldn’t it? If I were normal, maybe it would.

I watch the darkness.
I listen as the fighting ceases.

I wait for the sound of footsteps nearing the house Duo had chosen.

The moon rises. Or rather, the illusion of a moonrise is performed. Ghostly light spills across the colony interior, casting the population in gradients of shadow.

Sinking down onto my sleeping bag, I study Duo. He’d curled up onto his side, his braid coiled worryingly around his neck. But he’s still breathing, so I don’t risk waking him with a touch. Won’t risk shattering his trust by handling what might be his most precious possession without permission.

Even in sleep, there’s an edge to his sleeping face, a tension, and I still don’t know why he’d avoided using his full name, or even his given name, at the building site. Had he believed that “Maxwell” would draw too much attention on a colony where a monument to ruins of the same name is commonly known? I can easily imagine it inviting all kinds of inferences and uncomfortable questions. Even so, why had he elected not to go by “Duo”?

I can only assume that his name is as unusual as it is memorable. Who is Duo hiding from? What could make Duo hide his identity on this insignificant colony when an entire war and multiple armies hadn’t forced him to even assume an alias?

I have never felt curiosity this acutely.

Not that I plan to push him on the issue. Duo must have good reasons. Just as I do. I’d introduced myself to the reverend and the three guys from the colony recycling center as “T.W. Bloom.” I hadn’t wanted them to connect me to either Gundam pilot 03 or Dekim Barton. Perhaps I’m just being overly suspicious and paranoid.

But still, there is the possibility that I’m not.

I tell myself to think about it later. I track the steady rise and fall of Duo’s chest. My fingertips feel strangely warm – hot – as I remember the feel of Duo’s taut muscles beneath them.

My frown deepens when I realize that I’ve never done that before: I’ve never offered to touch someone who hadn’t been injured or ill. There’s a reason why I prefer pants and turtlenecks. The same reason why I never stuff my jeans hip pockets with spare change, keys, or whatnot; I like having a simple means of keeping my hands to myself, controlling even inadvertent and casual touches.

No, wait. Duo is injured. Something in his mind is causing him harm. The massage had been necessary to help him relax so that he can rest up and stay strong. I hadn’t lied to either of us about that.

It still doesn’t explain why my fingertips and palms simmer with heat at the mere memory of it.

Each moment I’ve shared with Duo since bumping into him outside the store is burned into my memory. Some moments make my throat tighten. Some carve sharply into me like a blade, scars that don’t deaden my nerves but rather make them thrum with energy. And tonight – taking care of him – had been... indescribable. It had felt like—

My thoughts grind to a halt.

I’d felt.

Again.
My jaw clenches. I don’t want this. I don’t want to go where this journey is leading me. But then, I’m not here for myself. I’m here for Duo. To help Duo. That’s why I’m here.

For Duo.

Whatever I experience is inconsequential.

That fact doesn’t stop me from dreaming of him. A smile in the light of a streetlamp. My fingertips sifting through his unbound hair. The feel of his eyelashes against my bare knee as he blinks. A vague sense of time running out. Hunters moving in the darkness. When Duo’s callused hand is yanked from my grasp, my eyes fly open.

It’s not yet dawn. A muffled whimper from my housemate has me scooting closer. His back is to me so I don’t even have to sit up in order to reach the corded muscles in the back of his neck. I squeeze his trembling shoulders, working the stress from his body.

The room begins to lighten before Duo relaxes, flopping onto his back and letting out a soft snore. I cross my arms and stare up at the rafters, tracking the progress of a single cockroach as it reconnoiters every square inch of Duo’s backpack. It can sense the open bag of peanut butter, but can’t find a way in.

How pitiful is it that I can commiserate?

How many times have I reexamined Duo’s mask, searching for a crack to exploit, seeking a glimpse into his thoughts, waiting for a flicker of his true self to emerge from behind the anger in his eyes?

What would Duo do if I were to kiss him? The thought shocks me. Literally. Not because it had occurred to me, but because of my reaction to it: pure electricity.

I shake my head. I have a little time yet. I’ll come up with something else. There must be another way to get past his defenses.

“Identifying the enemy is half the fight,” the captain had been fond of saying. I don’t know what I’m fighting against. I need to get Duo to talk to me.

I consider the whiskey. The possibility of a kiss revisits uninvited. Bodies pressed together on two layers of sleeping bags.

Goose bumps flash up my arms.

I take a deep breath. Let it out.

If I close my eyes, I’ll be able to sleep a little more.

The very idea of slumber repulses me. I’ve slept for far too long already. I sit in the dark until it turns light.

When Duo wakes on a stretch, lashes fluttering and fingers splaying at the end of long arms reaching over his head, I’m sitting on my rolled up sleeping bag, watching the street from my post beside the window.

“Good morning,” I offer.

Duo shivers, the motion turning his yawn into a series of choppy gasps. “Is it?”

I stare at him in question.
“Good?” he clarifies with a sarcastic smile.

“Sleep well?” I remind him.

He frowns. “Yeah.” Then he spots his boots and dirty socks at the end of his sleeping bag. He pulls his feet out and gapes at them. “The hell?”

“You’re welcome.” My tone is too brusque. Irritated.

Amazingly, he gives me a beaming, bright smile.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Not even a breath. My heart feels like it’s crushing my lungs.

But then a darkness sweeps over him, smothering the happiness he’d effortlessly shown me. He turns away.

“Well. Never had the spa treatment before. Now I know what I’ve been missing.”

His voice is hard, his tone sharpened with renewed sarcasm.

I’m moving before I have a plan, before I even think it through. I grab his shoulder, turning him to face me, and I snarl, “Enough. Enough of this.”

He blinks at me, startled, stiff, braced for a fight. That’s the only reason I don’t shake him silly.

“I won’t make you tell me,” I rashly promise. “But if you’re determined to finish what you started in three and a half days, then give yourself to those days, damn it.”

His jaw clenches.

I inform him, “Continuing on this way is a waste, Duo. A waste of you.”

He stares at me with eyes that are wide and empty of anger. He looks so young. Lost. How do I make him understand that I’ve found him? How do I make that be enough?

I let go. Stand and move to untie the twine holding the trapdoor shut. “The house has been quiet since I woke up at five-thirty, but I’ll take a look.”

“Wait,” he says roughly. Clearing his throat, he yanks his bag down and paws through it for a fresh pair of socks. “We’ll go together.”

I wait. He pulls his boots on. Packs up. I grab my Alliance bunk roll. We go down the steps in silence. Move through the halls. I spot a pile of rags and three pairs of small, grubby feet sticking out from behind a partially open door. Tugging on Duo’s sleeve, I nod to the room. He leads us out quickly, leaving the homeless children undisturbed.

He doesn’t have to tell me that we won’t be coming back to this house tonight.

“You’re quiet,” Duo accuses as we make our way to the building site.

I shrug. “I’m a quiet guy.”

“Yeah, but this here is you plotting something.”

“Maybe I am. Are you complaining?”
“No point,” he replies lightly, drawing in a deep breath and throwing his shoulders back. Swaggering down the empty street. “But I wouldn’t say ‘no’ to a little action.”

I send him a sidelong look.

He returns it with a scythe-like curve of his lips. “Trouble-making is an under-appreciated art form.”

With a dramatic sigh, I drawl flatly, “So we’re locking Jamesson in the porta-john today.”

Duo snickers. “Wouldn’t necessarily be a bad place for him.”

“What don’t you like about the guy exactly?”

“Not a damn thing.” The hard edge is still there in his eyes. The tilt of his chin speaks of an oncoming fight. “Some shit is easier to deal with than others is all.”

I shake my head. I still don’t understand.

Arriving at the site an hour early, Duo and I take turns in the porta-john. Next we crack open the tap on the free-standing water line. Pulling my shirt off in the chilly and windless morning air, I splash even colder water over my face, neck, and armpits. After a round of sanitize gel on my hands and scalp, I follow Duo’s example and use an additional dollop of gel to shave. Blindly. Very carefully. With that accomplished, I’m as ready as I’ll ever be for yet another peanut butter sandwich.

The reverend is shocked to find us already sorting through smaller bits of debris when he arrives.

“Here, fellas,” he insists, offering us each the work gloves we’d borrowed the day before. “That might have sharp edges. Save your hands.”

Though he’s not particularly strong, Jamesson is dedicated. Unfortunately, the three guys from the recycling center don’t show up until well after noon.

“Have a good shift, there, guys?” Duo asks.

Matt rolls his eyes. “A barrel of chuckle sauce.”

“Good thing we’ve got this to look forward to,” Ron adds with a wink at the reverend.

Jack coughs loudly, giving Ron a wry look. “Got something brown on your nose there, pal.”

“Go stuff your, um, laundry basket,” Ron adroitly ad libs.

“Nice save,” Duo approves.

Ron blinks. “Save what? I said exactly what I meant to, J.D.”

“Uh-huh. Sure you did.”

I snort. When Matt asks how I’m doing today, I give him the same answer I’d supplied yesterday: “Fine.”

Duo grins. “That’s T.W.-speak for ‘My eyes opened at the butt crack of colony dawn and I hate peanut butter sandwiches.’”

“I don’t hate peanut butter sandwiches.”
Jack laughs. “Woah! A whole sentence! Tell us your secret, J.D.!”

Duo’s grin is bashful. He shrugs. “I’m still trying to figure that out myself, man.”

We get back to work. I no longer question why Duo and I hadn’t seen the recycle workers this morning: these three are moonlighting for the reverend. They aren’t here in an official recycle-work capacity as I’d assumed. I should have known better. No one on this colony would volunteer their time, money, or workforce without expecting immediate and direct reimbursement.

Which makes me wonder. I wait until the others are out of earshot to ask Duo why more people haven’t shown up to answer the reverend’s ad. Money is money, after all, and the pay is decent.

The smile Duo gives me is dangerous. Bloodthirsty. “Obviously, no one else is as suicidal as we are.”

“Care to explain that?”

His gaze slides toward the street and the occasional pedestrian. Which is, of course, not a pedestrian at all. The majority of them are scouts.

“Is this a problem we’re going to avoid?” I’ve nothing against a confrontation. I’m only curious.

“That would be the smart and profitable thing to do.”

I quirk a brow and stare at him until he gives me a straight-er answer.

“Hey, life is short.”

“There are ways to guarantee that, yes.”

Duo’s jaw clenches.

When quitting time comes, the reverend invites us all out for dinner downtown. Matt, Ron, and Jack are quick to accept. With only the barest hesitation, Duo includes me and himself in the group. Scouts watch us as we leave. I can’t bring myself to care.

… DUO …

Trowa Barton is the most maddening, stubborn, persistent, opinionated, obnoxious jerk I have ever met. How am I just now realizing this?

Still, I can’t argue that the guy has got mad massage skills.

“Hmmm. Ooh, yeah.” I feel a slow grin tugging at my mouth as only the barest twinge of an ache warns me away from daring any complicated yoga moves while I’m riding the center beam of an unfinished tenth floor. Trowa had been right about taking care of my back before going to sleep last night. I can’t stop a goofy grin as I relive that massage. No one has ever done anything like that for me before. It had been...

Nice, I decide.

Too nice.

I shiver but don’t retreat to the little nest of sleeping bags and luggage. I dig my fingers into the
metal beam, letting the cold numb my skin, letting the distance to the ground and the promise of instant death below snip through my tenuous connection to reality. Up here in this unfinished office building, nothing is real and everything is real. Both at the same time, which I think is pretty awesome.

Trowa strolls out onto the neighboring beam, hands in his pockets, gazing dispassionately down at the world below. Somewhere down there, we’d had a wholesome dinner courtesy of the reverend. We’d wished Matt, Ron, and Jack a good night. We’d waved off the reverend’s offer to put in a good word for us as the boarding house where he’s staying: “We’re, like, free spirits, Reverend. We got this.” Not an hour ago, somewhere down there, Trowa had stopped on the sidewalk and suddenly gazed up at the skeleton of an unfinished structure and I’d just as suddenly known where we’d be spending the night.

Jumping the security fence had been easy.

Climbing up to the tenth story had been fun.

Gazing out at the softly winking lights meant to simulate stars is soothing.

Figuring out how to get Trowa’s harsh words from this morning out of my head is proving to be a real pain in the ass.

I glare at him out of the corner of my eye. As always, there’s no wind, so his bangs never shift unless he deliberately tilts his head to the side. Even now with only me here, his expression is concealed. Thoughts hidden. The man himself, unknown.

Clearly sensing my gaze, he turns toward me. Waits. I’ve got to admire the guy’s patience. He’s been waiting for days for me to tell him why. I still can’t believe he won’t ask.

Cocky sonuvabitch, isn’t he?

Well, I guess we’ll see, won’t we?

Taking a deep breath, I ready myself to shimmy further along to the next intersecting beam, but I pause when my shift in weight causes something to slap against my shoe. I glance down. My right boot laces are untied.

I look up just as Trowa’s gaze lifts from the same focal point. We stare at each other in silence. On Peace Million, Trowa and I had been the sort of pals who’d followed each other around for no reason at all, not bothering to say much. Just orbiting one another in companionable silence at a comfortable distance.

And here we are again: two strange bodies and the distance between us is lessening with every day.

He steps over to the very edge of the building and I find myself both envying and appreciating his effortless strength, the deceptively casual but totally precise way he moves: every footstep is perfectly balanced.

I have to look away as I bring my foot up to the beam to knot the laces. It’s all too easy to remember Trowa’s firm, careful touch as he’d removed my boots. How had I never seen this side of the guy before? After all, we’d fought in the same war... on the same side, more or less, but I hadn’t had a clue.

God. Last night Trowa had freakin’ taken care of me. Not like a medic would look after a patient, but more like an honest-to-God friend would look after his buddy. I just can’t figure him out. Once
upon a time I’d been an effin’ genius at pegging people. How had I missed this?

One thing’s for damn sure: I don’t miss the nightmares.

Whoa. Hold up.

No nightmares.

Not since Trowa got here.

And just what the hell am I supposed to think of that?

I haven’t had a dream strong enough to recall since Trowa had bumped into me outside the general store. For a long moment, I just try to wrap my mind around that.

I _should_ have had the mother of all night terrors after surviving detox. It should have been masher’s welcome-back-to-the-shithole-that-is-your-life present. The first night after coming down from a mashing is always a fucking space wreck in your psyche. I’d been expecting it — damn well dreading it — and yet it hadn’t happened.

But. Just because the nightmares haven’t hit me recently doesn’t mean they’re gone forever. It is gonna happen. It’s inevitable. And when it does... Well. I’ll give you three guesses as to how Trowa’s gonna deal with that and the first one doesn’t count, which leaves two fantastic possibilities: either I’m gonna be the oh-so-lucky recipient of more fucking pity or I’ll get a flat stare and a second lecture on getting my damn life together. “Face your demons and be done with it,” Heero had said. Could I stand the same from Trowa?

Nope.

My days with Trowa are numbered. All I’ve got left is choosing how it ends. Either he walks away or I do. Call me a coward, but I’m gonna go with the second one, there.

“If you’re not going to talk tonight, let’s get some sleep,” he says softly.

I acquiesce on a shrug.

I’m not surprised when he zips our bags together, pressing against my side and sharing his warmth with me. Which I’m damn grateful for. The metal sheeting under us is hard and cold. Colder than the warped floor in a one-sneeze-could-knock-it-down house ever thought of.


Why does background noise always seem ten times as loud right after you go to all the trouble of lying down for some shuteye?

Trowa’s not asleep yet; I can feel him tense up next to me with each muffled, echoing sound.

“The view is to kill for,” he muses.

My laugh is nearly silent, but it scrapes my throat raw.

I don’t miss his careful wording to avoid the big D-word, there. I shouldn’t be so shocked that he’s fighting against my wishes so hard. Trowa had insisted on trying to save Heero after the asshole had pushed the big red button of doom. In my opinion, that had been the biggest and best “fuck you” of the war: not Heero’s compliance with J’s order to self-destruct, but Trowa going out of his way not to leave a man behind.
“You mean, the view is to live for,” I hear myself counter.

He doesn’t startle, but I sense that I’ve jarred him fully awake. “A lot of things are.”

I don’t argue. I ask, “What gets the death penalty?”

He shifts. I can feel him studying my profile. I refuse to look him in the eye. Which is just dumb because it’s not like he’ll be able to look into my brain and see my secrets. But just in case, I turn away from him, presenting him with my back.

I’m an instant away from sleep when he murmurs my name.

“What?” I respond tiredly.

A long moment passes before he admits, “I still can’t think of anything.”

“We’re gonna have to work on your imagination powers, oh daring super hero.”

“I grew up in a troupe of mercenaries. I don’t have to imagine those kinds of things.”

I suppose he doesn’t. “Your parents?”

“I don’t expect I’ll ever know the answer to that.”

Not too long ago, I would have said the same. “I kick in my sleep,” I warn him.

“I think I’ll live.”

If I have anything to say about it, yeah, he’d damn well better.

I wake to the feel of an arm retreating from around my waist. I’m half lying on Trowa, my back against his chest with zero personal space between us. I’m warm and comfortable… and in instant agony.

As they say, life’s a bitch and then you die.

Cringing away and squiggling out of the sleeping bag, I ignore Trowa’s soft “good morning.” It’s not good and it’s barely morning.

We have to get moving before the workers show up and call the police. I’ve never been a guest in the colony detention cells and I plan to keep it that way.

The market is closed up tight. I check my watch and sanitize my hands. Fix a sandwich. Eat. I pop the last bite in my mouth as a rattle at the gate signals the start of the business day. We do a load of laundry. I carefully re-wrap the bottle of whiskey, wedging it in beside the book I’m also carrying. Some clothes, a book, a bottle of whiskey, a jug of water, some food, sanitize gel, a cook-set, and a sleeping bag. Not much to show for a life, is it? Counting my knives, roll of twine, and other assorted emergency items is pointless. Those aren’t achievements; they’re life lessons.

Trowa and I make it to the site before eight o’clock. I don’t turn my back as he washes up. Waiting for my shot at the spigot, I track the glittering beads of water as they arc through the air, slide over his scarred back, trickle down his arms. I really should have let myself enjoy our camp cuddle this morning.

Another missed opportunity. I’m real good at those.
I startle when I realize Trowa hasn’t just caught me staring at his bare skin; he’s staring back. Unbothered by the scrutiny. Unashamed to stand there and let me look. Maybe he’s even hoping I’ll see something I want bad enough to scrap my plans for. Heh. Talk about saving a life.

“You try this shit out on Heero?” I blurt.

He blinks once, a moment of shock crossing his face. “Try what?”

He honestly doesn’t know. Oh, Jesus. He has no idea what he does to me, and I’m yea close to clueing him in. I scramble to cover my ass.

I take too long.

His eyes narrow — I can see both thanks to his damp hair tucked behind his ear — and then his shoulders jerk with what could be a shiver but isn’t. Those green eyes, so striking in a place like this where nothing is as vibrant and verdant as his irises, pin me in place. God damn it. He’s figured it out.

He doesn’t smirk. He doesn’t even lean in. “I’ve considered it,” he freely admits and my heart tumbles in my chest, “but I’m not ‘trying’ anything. If I were trying, you’d know it.”

My dry-throated swallow gets stuck somewhere around my esophagus.

He moves away from the spigot. “All yours,” he says, still watching me, face still fully visible, chest still bare.

Gritting my teeth, I tear my layers of shirts off over my head and dive for the frigid water. It does nothing to stop me from wondering what it would be like with him. Wondering if I could be convincing enough to make him think he’s changed my mind, because something tells me he won’t indulge me for the sake of a friendly send-off.

I splash in the cold, icy hatred of my own life.

The sound of an approaching truck engine and movement out of the corner of my eye has me spinning around. Trowa, both shirts now on, is standing between me and the RC truck that’s rolling to a stop at the curb. I pull my clothes on and slap the tap shut. Grab my gloves. Wave to Jack as he leans out the cab window. Riding shotgun is a dude I’ve never seen before and who looks just fucking thrilled down to his pinkie toes to be here… not.

“Yo, Jack. What’s the plan, man?”

“J.D.,” he greets. “T.W.” Angling a thumb towards the pile of metal scrap heaped near the back of the truck, he explains, “Looks like you’ve got enough for a full load. Neil and I will give you a hand.”

“Awesome!” It isn’t, but it is appreciated, so I figure, eh, close enough.

Neil looks considerably happier when the reverend shows up in time to push a hefty tip into his hand and shove a second rolled up bill into Jack’s. As the truck grinds and farts off toward the recycle center, Trowa asks the man, “Are you from this colony?”

“Ah, no.” The reverend confesses, “I grew up on a resource satellite in L3. There are a lot of hard working fellas who don’t get paid what their work is worth.”

I nod, noting how Jamesson’s gaze moves away from the res-den and across downtown to the
opposite curve of the colony. “You know all about the factory district,” I observe.

“I do, yes. I’d originally hoped to build a chapel there, but…”

Yeah. But. I don’t tell him that the people there have their own religion of poverty-line creature comforts. Hey, compared to the res-den, the factory workers have got it made. “You’re needed here more,” I tell him instead.

Jamesson startles. “What do you mean? The people downtown are—”

I hold up a hand. “The folk downtown care about profits more than Jesus, sir.” I can feel Trowa’s gaze on me and I try to explain what I mean as quickly as possible. “There used to be a church here. A homeless shelter. An orphanage. A soup kitchen, free clinic, and halfway house.”

The reverend gazes out at the res-den. “So, the gangs are a recent development?”

“Ah, no,” I admit. “But have you noticed that no one has messed with this site?”

“I assume there’s a reason for that. The police presence?”

“Um, no. A lot of the guys in the res-den older than me grew up thanks to the church. They remember better times, y’know? And they’ve told the younger ones. I’d bet they’re giving you a little time and space to prove yourself.” The reverend looks stunned, so I figure I’d better spell it out, “Things are a lot worse now than they used to be.”

“But, if they’d welcome a church, why hasn’t anyone come forward to help?”

“How do you know they haven’t? For all you know, T.W. and I are with a gang.”

Jamesson slowly shakes his head. “No. You aren’t. But you aren’t colony-hoppers, either. I may not know much about you two, but I do know that.”

“Look, man, there’s one thing you gotta know. The gangs are into all kinds of bad business, but you cannot give preferential treatment and you can’t shut them out. When they come to you, you gotta just look the other way on the things they’ve done to survive. It’s gonna be hard and they’re gonna test you over and over again, but you need them on your side because the police sure won’t be.”

“Why would the police be my enemy?”

I explain the facts of life here: the police work for the rich assholes on the Crest who pay their salaries and they’re allowed a side business in the res-den collecting “favors” from the gangs in exchange for looking the other way on crimes that happen beyond the lit streets.

Standing on my flank, Trowa says nothing. Just scans the area. Committing the faces of inquisitive scouts to memory. I don’t tense when I see Retcher wander past, though I’m surprised that word of our presence here has reached all the way up the res-den to the old Alliance base neighborhood.

“Think real hard about whether you can do this,” I advise Reverend Jamesson, “because if you can’t, it’d be better for you to catch the next shuttle out of here.”

He opens his mouth to respond.

I hold up a hand. “Just give it a good think, OK?”

“All right. I will.”
Trowa and I get back to work. Just before lunch, another truck shows up. Matt is driving this one. Neil is in the passenger seat again and looking positively eager for his next tip.

We load up the synthetic stone to be sent to the crusher. Every single type of building material used on the colony is meant to be broken up, melted down, and formed again. Metal and pseudo-cement are going to be needed first in the construction of the new church. The plastic-based walls and rubber seals will happen later, so those piles remain untouched today.

At about two in the afternoon, after Trowa and I stuff a couple of sandwiches into us, the guys show up again. We finish clearing the area just after six. The reverend insists on celebrating. From the look on his face, Trowa has no intention of turning him down.

It’s dark out when we leave the diner. I heft my sleeping bag up on my shoulder until it bounces against my backpack. “Thanks for feeding us, Reverend.”

“My pleasure, gentlemen. See you tomorrow!”

My elbow nudges Trowa’s arm and he falls into step beside me without hesitation. No hesitation whatsoever. The guy really does say a helluvalot without ever opening his mouth.

“What have you been thinking about so damn hard today?” I demand.

He grunts. “Maybe I’m just a pretty face after all.”

I laugh. Out loud. Real loud. “Sell it to someone who isn’t me.”

With a sweeping gaze that would look like boredom to anyone else, he answers my question, “You told Jamesson about this place.”

“Somebody had to.”

“I thought you didn’t care.”

The remark shocks me into looking him in the eye. Reading his expression, I smirk. “No, you didn’t.” What an asshole. Saying shit like that just to pull a reaction from me. Well, if he’s gonna go to all this trouble, maybe I’ll give him one for free. “Of course I care. I just wish to hell I didn’t.”

Trowa doesn’t say anything else as we meander back to the market street. Instead of hanging around out front in the light of the streetlamp, we duck down the side alley. There’s a service entrance to the laundromat that I’d gotten a better look at today. The lock looks like a tough one, and the security system is better than average, but I’m pretty sure I can tuck us into the crawl space above the shop in ten minutes or less.

I get to work.

Trowa leans against the unwashed wall, doing a pretty good impersonation of a drunken moron on the verge of tossing his cheese and cracker jacks.

Grinning, I file this moment away for later when I’ll be able to ask him about the last time he’d gotten shitfaced. They say art is drawn from life and it sure as shit looks like Trowa’s drawing from something that—

A sharp sting in the center of my back has me flinching, dropping my lock picks to the ground. I stare at my shaking hands, too shocked for horror to take a foothold. Shoving my backpack at Trowa, I wheeze, “Run!”
He reaches for me.

“No, damn it, run! NOW!”

My knees turn to water. I don’t even feel it when I sag against the door, sliding down. I feel nothing. Nothing since the dart had hit me. The only reason I know I’m falling is because Trowa, my point of reference, looms over me inch by inch.

Oh, Jesus. I’m a moron.

That’s all the regret I have time for, and then I see Trowa flinch hard. Bang into a nearby dumpster as he fumbles for his duffel bag zipper.

Yeah, it’s too late to go for the knife in his boot. Too fucking late.

My eyes close. My brain shuts down.

Sweet dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Trowa’s references to their time spent together aboard Peace Million while Trowa had still been suffering from amnesia is also from the series. At that point in the series, though Trowa can’t remember his past, he can still pilot a mobile suit with impressive skill. I’ve read fic that blames this on muscle memory. I guess it totally could be. Who knows? It’s a really interesting theory. Muscle memory is certainly how I remember how to write a number of Japanese kanji characters, to be honest.

Duo says he’s never been in a colony detention cell. This is debatable; in the Episode Zero comic, Duo is clearly in some sort of cell or brig. Is it a colony jail, an Alliance cell, or some other lock-up? I don’t think the manga itself is completely clear. All we know from Episode Zero is that in one frame, Duo’s locked up (AC 192) and then in the next he has already stowed away on Howard’s ship.

If you’re scatterbrained like I am, here’s a quick rundown of the Seven Days’ Bargain:
Chapter 6: Duo begins detox = 7 days remaining (36 hours is spent on detox and rest)
Chapter 7: Duo and Trowa escape from the roamers = 5.5 days remaining
Chapter 8: First night in the attic = 5 days remaining
Chapter 9, Trowa: Second night in the attic = 4 days remaining
Chapter 9, Duo: Night spent on the tenth floor of the unfinished downtown building = 3 days remaining
Chapter 9, Duo: Duo attempts to break into the arcade laundromat for the night = 2 days remaining

We’re counting down to something like 8 p.m., so a “day” is 24 hours starting and ending about an hour after colony nightfall.

So, like, I hope you’re ready for some badass! Trowa. (^_^)
Zipline

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: language, drug use, violence, gore, reference to human trafficking


This chapter has its own music soundtrack:
“Hysteria” by Muse
“Pretty Piece of Flesh” by One Inch Punch
“Plom” by Hyaline
“24” by Jem
“Fight Inside” by RED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... TROWA ...

Duo. Oh, God. No.

“Run!” he orders on a thin breath, shoving his backpack at me. Horror and urgency and mercenary purpose steal over me as his eyes droop and muscles go lax. Duo slumps against the wall and I reach for him before I can help myself, before I can think.

Stop.

If I try to help him now, we’ll both be caught.

Because the soldier in me is never wrong, I force my hands away from Duo and scan the darkness. A tingle of instinct has me turning just as something — a dart, I realize — pricks my shoulder through the layers of my sleeping bag. I twist aside, jarring it loose, hoping I haven’t gotten the full dose.

Quickly, I dig into my duffel bag, my trembling fingers finding the vial I’ve been hiding for the last five days. I thumb off the cap, both uncaring of where it goes and unable to hear it strike the paneling underfoot, and I upend the vial of zipline into my mouth.

I just have to stay awake for two minutes. That’s all I’ll need for the full dose to take effect. Two minutes.

Duo, I’m here.

I curve my body around him, plucking the dart from the center of his back. My right hand is hanging low near the knife in my boot and I hope I’ll have the capacity to draw it.

The shadows are moving.

Bodies in the darkness.
Quiet whispers.

“Fuck, the big one’s mashing.”

“Drop him. We need the skin.”

My legs are shaking, trembling with suppressed tension, but my head feels like it’s about to spin off of my shoulders. It’s only been six seconds. I don’t have two minutes. I can’t afford to wait.

I lunge, swinging Duo’s backpack at my first target.

Whoosh!

Thwack!

CRACK!

My fist sends a figure rebounding off of the wall. He falls into a helpless sprawl.

A boot to the groin of another. An elbow up high into the face of a third.

Back to the second: uppercut to the chin. Lights out.

Before he lands on the motionless body of the first, I pound a fist into the lower back of the third. He twists with agony and I bring my clasped hands down against his temple, bouncing his skull off of the side of the dumpster.

He joins his friends on the floor of the alleyway.

Duo.

I turn — too sudden. The world spins. Duo’s backpack smacks against my belly. There’s a third dart stuck in the coarse fabric. Why is my arm threaded through the strap?

Duo.

Sight blurring, I plant a hand against the laundromat service door, but it’s still shut and there’s no one kneeling against it.

Duo?

I blink down at the dart on the ground, the one I’d plucked from Duo’s back, and I shake aside the creeping numbness.

Duo!

I look up into the pitch blackness of the alley. There’s no moonlight yet. It’s too early.

Duo!

I’m too late. I scoop up the dropped lock picks and force my legs to move. How much noise am I making? I don’t know. I hike Duo’s bag over my shoulder and run as steadily as I’m able over a ground that shifts and slides like the deck of a small boat on the sea.

I run until I stumble out into a lamp-lit street. Look left. Right. Everywhere.

I’m the only one out here. Just me and the silence.
Oh, God. *Duo.*

NO.

I must have missed a turn, a narrow service lane in the darkness. I consider backtracking.

High risk. Slim chance of success.

I clearly remember what one of my opponents had said about skins; I’m no good to Duo if I end up shipped off-colony in a slaver’s vessel.

Damn it. I don’t have time for this dithering! What are my other options?

Ah.

Of course.

I take off at a dead run, sticking to the safelines and feeling eyes on me. The zipline is surging through my veins, making me feel strong enough to knock down houses with a single punch, giving me the mental acuity to process easily twice the amount of sensory data I normally would, convincing me that my progress is being tracked by enemies.

That might be exactly who I’m heading for, but I figure I’ve got nothing left to lose. Except Duo.

NO.

The safelines lead me to my destination in less than ten minutes. The ruins of the Maxwell church unfold before me as I skid around the corner. I sprint down the street and right up to the time-worn apartment building with the chipped, synthetic stone steps and cracked windows.

Taking the half-flight of stairs two steps at a time, I launch myself at the door, pounding on it with a fist that tingles with heat. Too much zipline. Fuck. As there’s no point in worrying about how hard I’m going to crash from this high, I keep my eyes on my surroundings and my money makers out.

I jump back a step as the door flies open and a massive man frowns down at me. “I need to speak with the guy who sits out here smoking. Five days ago, he was right here.”

“I ain’t knock the fook you stunk on.”

But from the way his facial muscles twitch, I know that he has a really good idea who I mean. “Tell him the trek-frek is back. I have business to discuss. He’ll want to hear me out.”

“Fook, who the hell are you?”

“Someone you don’t want to make angry.”

A third voice calls softly, “Let him in, Drege.”

With a mighty frown, the doorman takes half a step to the side. I angle my shoulder into his chest and “help” him make room for me. The door slams shut. Drege plants himself in front of it. I stop in the middle of the dingy foyer and look up the stairs. The kid from the steps leans over the second floor railing smiling down at me.

“Yo, trek-frek. What you jacking?”

“I need a favor.”
"And what you got me for this favor?"

"A favor."

He smirks. "Yeah? Quote me a star."

I don’t understand.

"How much you got?" he clarifies.

"Who,?" I correct.

"Who?"

"My name is Trowa Barton. Gundam pilot 03. You want the favor or not?"

The kid straightens. The grin melts off of his face. "Holy Helen. Are you sweet darting me?"

I don’t have the patience to convince him. "I have a situation. My friend. The guy you helped me find. He was taken off the street." I check my watch. "Thirteen minutes ago."

"Def true love, isn’t it, fook?"

"I’ll do what I have to to get him back alive."

"Your friend have a name?"

I think about it for half a second before I decide it’s worth the risk. Duo had attempted to preserve his anonymity either because he’s famous or infamous. I accept the possibility that I’ll be joining up with a gang that wants the pleasure of killing him themselves. So long as they help me find him, I’ll deal with the rest later.

"Duo Maxwell."

A choking noise from behind me — Drege swallowing his own tongue, maybe — accompanies the widening of the kid’s eyes. "Duo’s flat on? Here? That sad routine was him?"

"That was Duo, yes."

"You knock who got him?"

Appreciating the militant gleam in the kid’s eye, I struggle for something to offer as evidence.

The dart.

Shrugging one arm out of Duo’s backpack straps, I glance down. There it is; it’s still stuck in the fabric. "Are all sweet dreams darts the same make?"

"No. Course not. You seen it?"

I point to it. "Brassy base metal with two red rubber seals, one at each end."

The kid stiffens. "Drege."

I hold my hands up as the guard comes around and eyes me critically. I help him out with a glance downward at the backpack. I don’t move a muscle — not an easy feat considering how intense my high is — as two large, scarred fingers nimbly pluck the dart from the fabric.
“Monch,” the man grunts.

The kid grins. “You’re in a pot, Trowa Barton.”

“A pot?”

“Of luck.” He wiggles his brows. “We’ll get your boss back. No favors from you needed.”

“Why?” I force myself to ask.

“He’s Duo, the last of Maxwell’s kids and the guy who finally grafted the Alliance into the ass of this can.” He straightens. “And also, I’m gonna enjoy the look on Monch’s Crest-kisser when he knocks in who he’s fucked with.” From the kid’s slow smile, I imagine Monch’s own people will tear him apart. If I don’t get to him first.

“When do we leave?”

The kid snaps his fingers and I hear a whisper of movement simultaneously on all three floors. The half dozen doors lining the foyer swing ajar to reveal two and three gang members from each unit. They’re dressed dark, visibly armed, and clearly hungry for something to hurt.

Friends, indeed.

“Barton,” the kid calls as he comes down the stairs. “You jacking a blade? Stunker?”

I smirk. “I’m fine as I am.”

As if a Gundam pilot could answer any other way and still command the respect of a street gang on this colony.

The kid smirks back, reading my arched brow. “Yeah. Knocked, man.” He holds out his bare hand. “We’ll get your boss back all-one. Safe,” he adds.

“I’m coming with you,” I insist. “And you won’t try to stop me from hurting anyone who gets in my way.”

“Locked, Barton.”

We shake on it.

“The name’s Pinky. Let’s have us a house on fire.” Pulling his hand away, he gestures and the building empties. Gang members in an impressive range of sizes, shapes, and ages of both genders pour out into the streets. Pinky pauses long enough to pull out a home-rolled cigarette from his shirt pocket, light it, take a drag, and give me a fat grin.

Drege holds the door open.

“After you,” Pinky invites with a flick of his fingers.

It’s about time.

Drege and Pinky fall into step on either side of me. We walk swiftly, Pinky jogging every three steps or so to keep pace and exhale choppy plumes of smoke.

“So your boss got sweet dreams. How’d you squeeze out?”
“I didn’t.”

“What you say?”

My eyes move over the shadows. I know I’m in Pinky’s territory and relatively safe, but my paranoia is a force to be reckoned with; I couldn’t let my guard down even if I’d wanted to. “I said, ‘I didn’t.’ The first dart caught me through the camp roll. Allie bag. Partial dose.”

“The first… holy Helen. How are you still head-up, fook?”

“How do you think?” Like hell I’m going to tell him that I’d downed a dangerous amount of zipline. Let him think it’s part and parcel with Gundam pilot training… which I hadn’t received more than a few fast hours of before launch.

He shakes his head in amazement, blowing out a cloudy breath. “You jacking to knock Monch?”

“Should I be?”

Pinky shrugs. Speaking quietly, he volunteers, “Monch ain’t like the rest of us. He’s late from the fac-tric. Talks big and walks shifty. Been angling to crowd in on town, but we got him curlied. My people, Darl’s folk, Jebb’s like, and Morisa’s pack.”

“Your people,” I hear myself repeat, then pull together a comment so that Pinky doesn’t get the idea that I think he’s too young to be a full-fledged gang leader. I do think exactly that, but sharing the thought won’t help me get Duo back. “Your people inspire a lot of confidence.”

Pinky laughs at my hard tone. “Don’t wrinkle up. We got you this.”

And just what is this slippery little shit hoping to get from Duo? I keep my mouth shut. There’ll be plenty of time to discuss it later.

It takes the three of us twenty minutes to step into enemy territory. I know precisely when this happens because we turn a corner and find a group of ten blocking our path. Before the scout can demand an explanation, before any threats for setting foot in their territory are growled, Pinky’s men and women, boys and girls, charge from the shadows.

The struggle is brief. From the sound of torn flesh and the splatter of blood, I expect several of Monch’s people don’t survive it. The scent of death in the still night hardens my intent. Drege watches me like he’s waiting for me to lash out and snap his neck.

I won’t unless he gives me a reason to.

The thought almost makes me smile.

Two of Monch’s group are left alive, beaten, bound, and kneeling on the broken sidewalk. Pinky addresses them and, from what I can infer, the deal he gives them is rather brilliant: the one who leads them to Monch with the most speed and skill gets to keep his or her reputation. Pinky will put the word out on the street that the other one had ratted out their leader.

The young man and older woman both start talking at the same time, and I learn that gossip can be a death sentence on this brutal, little island of backstabbing humanity.

I wonder idly what’s going to stop our informants from leading us into an ambush, but Pinky’s got that taken care of. Two of his people slip loops of razor wire over the necks of their captives. The collar is connected to a short leash that allows the wire to slip through: a lethal choke chain. If the
prisoner’s handler falls down, the leash will go taut, pulling the razor wire until things get… uncomfortable.

Considering the poor way everything here is generally maintained, a clean beheading is probably too much to hope for. Choking to death on one’s own blood is not the way I’d prefer to die. Not theirs, either, apparently.

Drege takes command on the street. Pinky gestures for me to go up, joining a selection of the more agile members of the gang as we move from one rooftop to the next, skirting Monch’s patrols while keeping an eye on progress down below.

Our destination turns out to be not the rundown apartment complex at the end of the street, but the hangars out back. Multiple entrances and exits. Too many for Pinky’s gang to cover all of them and still move fast enough to stop harm from coming to Duo.

I put out my hand. “Either I go in alone, or I supply an external distraction.”

Pinky likes one of my ideas, that much is clear. “A distraction is gonna get you in a bad way.”

“Depends on the distraction.”

With a grand sweep of his sinewy arm, Pinky invites, “Humble me, Barton.”

“Looking forward to it.” I shrug out of my duffel bag and sleeping bag. With regret, I also part with Duo’s backpack, setting everything down with a significant look at Pinky.

“You’ll get them again, all-one. Lock.”

His word on it is probably the best I can expect. I nod and get on with my end of things.

I circle the hangars, moving from one roof to the next until, finally, I see precisely what I need: a wire cable. Apparently, someone had been too lazy to sort out the power lines in the colony maintenance tunnels and had elected to splice their way into a distant junction box.

I test the wire quickly. My body is humming for action and I have no patience for precautions. Besides, if it snaps and I fall to my death, there’s a pretty good chance that Pinky will go ahead with Duo’s retrieval regardless. And blame my demise on Monch.

But if I die, who will talk Duo down two days from now?

I draw in a deep breath and force myself to focus. I grab the wire, wrap my legs around it, and pull myself up, over, and into a sitting position. I belatedly remember my boots, but the tread is worn enough to allow for small adjustments. Socks might snag on the wire itself. And walking a wire in bare feet is an absolute last resort.

Thankful for the lack of wind, I stand up. Holding my arms out to either side, I envision walking along a straight, slender crack in a cushioned floor. I take my first step, centering my foot over the line. When I look down, I don’t see the distance between myself and the ground. I am on the ground, simply walking the crevasse between two sofa cushions. Nothing more difficult than that.

I don’t compare what I’m doing now to the wire I walk at the circus. There is no comparison. The width of the wire, the slack, the give of its elasticity: all different. Besides, I don’t have to care what tonight’s audience thinks of my performance.

A one-minute, slow, silent stroll leads me to the arched roof of the central hangar. In the moonlight, I
can make out weakened areas of the metal sheeting and deftly avoid those. Once I reach the front of
the hangar, I judge the distance between the edge of the roof and the lookout window over the main
entrance. Hoping someone is home, I swing down and send my left foot through the plastic
window, shattering the pane with a colony-quaking crack! that rolls and snaps like thunder.

With my right foot braced on the wall, I manage to pull back before the broken shards can slice
through my jeans. I roll back up onto the roof, satisfied to hear more than one shout. I crouch down,
listening as an argument starts over what had just crashed through the window.

I decide to help them out. With heavy steps, I run from the front of the building, allowing my
footsteps to fade before I sidestep in silence and lie down slightly off-center just in case someone gets
the bright idea to try and punch a hole through the roof in an attempt to skewer me with a mobile suit
welding torch. If they even have one.

The commotion dies down quickly. Relishing the puzzled silence, I pull my feet under me and race
across the roof, up one side and down the other, leaping through the air to land on the roof of the
neighboring hangar with a careful roll.

More doors open. More voices fill the empty spaces in the night.

I make more noise. Draw out more victims. Count how many times each hangar door opens and
how many sets of footsteps emerge.

Only one door doesn’t open at all. Either because there is no one and nothing worth protecting
within the building, or because there is. I gamble that Monch values Duo highly. Though not nearly
as highly as I do.

I slide quietly down the curved roof, landing in the tiny crawlspace between two structures, and wait.

Wait.

Wait.

Fighting erupts in silence. There is no battle cry, only the slice of sharp instruments in flesh and the
wet sound of massive blood loss. I creep toward the undisturbed entrance. Peek at the windows.
They’ve been painted or covered; they’re a flat black.

I check the hinges; they’re new. Though I feel as if I could kick a hundred doors in, I pull back.
Pick the lock with Duo’s kit. I open the door and retreat, wait for someone to come and investigate.

Someone does.

I’m inside the building before the body falls to the ground, already striking the figure looming behind
the door and grabbing her weapon. Tossing the knife meant for me toward the next guard. Burying
my own blade in the throat of the fourth. The fifth one shouts before I close the distance between us
on a flip and vertebrae grind and snap — crunch and shatter — in my hands.

I crouch beside the nearest cover, a hard plastic cargo crate, and listen. More fighting seeps in
through the open door. I scuttle forward and push it closed. Then I move back to the crates. The
first one I try is unlocked and empty. So is the second. The third has been locked and I’m certain
I recognize the soft whimper within.

My hands shake — too much zipline, damn it — as I work the lock, tossing the contraption away
and throwing open the door with no regard for self-preservation. Thoughts of my own safety grow
light-years distant as my gaze lands on Duo. His sleeping bag is long gone, but he’s still clothed.
His hair is still braided. He’s still unconscious, his fingers and face twitching as he fights the drugs. Fights his nightmares.

“Duo, I’m here. It’s Trowa. I’m here. Come on, now,” I mumble as I pull the grubby blanket he’s lying on over to the doorway. Once he’s close enough, I collect him in my arms. I keep talking quietly although I don’t expect him to wake.

He feels different in my arms now — bigger, heavier, more solidly muscled compared with the one other occasion I’d lifted him up. Back on X18999. Since then, Duo’s had a year of working scrap and salvage. The night Duo had detoxed, I’d been too distracted by my own exhaustion to notice. The zipline ensures that I notice his latent strength now.

Manual labor really does pay off; I like the results.

Appreciate later.

I glance toward the door and our escape but pause long enough to check the remaining two crates because I know Duo will ask. Luckily, both are also empty.

The battle outside is quieting as the shock of the initial volley wears off and Monch’s surviving people pull back to take up more defensible positions. Holding Duo close, I move silently through the shadows. I don’t bother to rejoin Pinky on the rooftop. If he’s even still there. He might be the leader, but a leader who doesn’t fight side by side with his troops won’t retain their confidence for long.

I’m passing a darkened alley when a shadow within shifts. Half expecting it, I nonetheless pivot, my fingers digging into Duo’s shoulder and thigh. Against my neck, his lips part. A sound that could be a word brands my skin.

Drege steps out. My duffel is in one hand. Duo’s backpack and my sleeping bag are slung over one massive shoulder. He offers to trade, our things for Duo: “I can haul him.”

I shake my head.

The big man isn’t surprised by my refusal. “What you jacking, man? Pinky’s orders.”

“We need a place to rest. He’ll start fighting the drugs soon. It’ll get loud.”

“I got you that.” Drege motions for me to follow and a second, smaller shadow darts into the street, racing toward the hangars and no doubt bearing word of our escape so that the others can fall back.

Drege insists on moving more slowly than I’d like, taking care at each intersection. I know that my arms ought to be burning and trembling from fatigue, but the zipline does its job. I only have to shift Duo once, kneeling and turning him in my arms at the halfway point.

Arriving at the apartment building across from the church ruins, I see Pinky already sitting on the steps, hands clean but face and shirt splattered with blood and gore. He’s leaning back on his elbows, lazily enjoying a smoke.

“Those things will kill you,” I warn him.

He barks out a laugh, motioning for me to come inside. Drege passes on my request and Pinky takes Duo and I to what appears to be a closet door in one of the first floor units. He toes it open and pulls a cord to illuminate a set of skeletal, metal steps leading down to a basement.
“Suicide room — only one way in and one way out.”

“Secure?”

“Drop bar on the inside.” He gestures to the archaic but effective locking mechanism on the other side of the door.

“Food? Water? Toilet?”

“Got you that. Pallet, too.”

I nod. I very badly want Duo in a safe place. A place where he can scream and whimper without these people hearing it. But I pause long enough to ask something else I’m sure Duo will want to know eventually. “How many people did you lose?”

Pinky’s grin falls into a hard line. “Three.”

“I’m sorry.”

“They ain’t. Rest of us ain’t, either. We’ve been scheming to gang on Monch for his shiz and what. Hanking on a clear line. You did us right, Barton. Lock, man. Lock.”

Whether he’s referring to the fact that we’d had an agreement or I should get my ass inside and shut the door, I don’t know or care. Duo flinches, muscles coiling with more force than before. It’s only a matter of time before his motor functions return. If he’s not awake by that time, things could get… painful.

I descend the stairs, turning at a small landing to take in the makeshift clinic in the basement. Looking up, I see padding secured to the ceiling. Sound proofing. This isn’t just a clinic, then. It’s an interrogation chamber.

That, actually, might be better. I set Duo down on a low pallet, noting the arm and leg restraints. The wide belt meant to hold a chest down against the stained sheets. At least they smell clean. Underneath them, I can hear the crinkle of plastic. For quick clean up and preservation of the bed. Mattresses are hard to come by in space.

While Duo is quiet, I jog up the stairs and take a good look at the apartment. After retrieving our things from beside the front door, I check the windows and casings. The vents and battered furniture. Catalog hiding places and good objects for cover. I shift a few things around. Lock the apartment door and brace it shut.

I then tie Duo’s twine around the knob and run it across the floor and beneath the basement door. Close it. Test the clearance; there’s just enough space for the twine to slip through easily. I lower the security bar and collect my empty water jug. Fill it half-full from the tap and tie the twine around it before balancing the base of the jug on the edge of a step. If anyone opens the door in the apartment above us, the twine will go slack and the jug will topple. As warning systems go, it’s not much, but it should get the job done.

Security addressed, I turn my attention to our other necessities: water, food, toilet. The latter of which I will need once I start detox. If Duo and I are still here in about twenty hours. I figure that’s about how long I have before the first wave hits. I wonder if there’s any point in hoping Duo will return the favor that I’d forced on him five nights ago.

I unzip my sleeping bag and lay it over the pallet like a blanket, then I pull off Duo’s boots. Kick off mine. I lay down next to him, tucking him up against the length of my body to hold him steady. To
monitor his condition. To distract me from the hours of buzzing adrenalin and insanity-inducing inactivity. Holding onto Duo gives me something to do, even if it’s not a particularly demanding activity. It’s better than not having him here to hold onto. So much better.

I check my watch. It hasn’t even been an hour since he was taken.

Duo kicks, flinching hard, and I grab onto his hands. Slide our palms together and pull his arms in tight. I could bind him, but I don’t. If not for the zipline, I would have.

A groan ekes out from between his clenched teeth. His body locks and trembles with terror. God how I wish I could be there inside his head, facing down his demons with him. What I wouldn’t give for a hard fight right now.

On the off chance that it will do any good at all, I talk. I’m grounded by the scent of blood in the air, the drying splashes on my blue turtleneck, and the sticky smears on my hands. Blood is real. Reality.

But what does it conjure up for Duo in his nightmares?

As soon as the thought occurs to me, I release my hold on him and roll away. Shuck off my bloody clothes and toss them across the room. Clean up with cold water and body wipes. Dress in the pair of sleep pants I’d brought with me — I’d packed them on a contrary surge of optimism — and I tug a long-sleeved T-shirt on over my head.

I keep an eye on Duo throughout, noting every toss of his head, every soft noise of distress he makes. I remove his outer shirt. It’s black so I can’t see any stains, but it’s damp in spots where the blood splatter on me had soaked it. When I lie back down with him, he quiets.

“Duo, I’m here. I’ve got your back. I’m not going anywhere.”

His eyes fly open, but he doesn’t see me. Those dark eyes are focused on something beyond this borrowed bolthole.

“Duo,” I say. I reach for him again, wrap him up tight, and wait for the moment when he’ll finally be able to grab onto the here-and-now. I make sure there’s something for him to grab on to. A voice, a touch, anything.

He wails. Twists. Burrows against my chest. His breaths shorten with panic or terror or both. I pull him closer. Speak into his ear.

He shouts a wordless denial. Kicks me in the shins. Claws at the fabric over my chest. I idly wonder if Pinky keeps medicine down here, antibiotic ointment for a bite, because it’s likely that’s what I’ll get next: Duo’s teeth in my flesh.

Ah! The spark of electricity is back.

Hm. I’ve never had that particular thought-and-reaction before. Odd.

Another twenty minutes pass as Duo gains control over his voice and body. His struggles grow in strength. I can nearly make out whole words in his sobs.

I talk to him, call him back from the darkness. “Listen to me, Duo. I’m right here. You’re not alone. Can you hear me?”

A shuddering breath — I feel it, hear it. And then: “Tr—T.W.”
“It’s Trowa,” I confirm, letting him know that we’re safe. “I’ve got you.”

“Help—help me s-save them. Pl-please help me…”

“Whatever you need, Duo,” I promise. “Anything at all.”

Chapter End Notes

Upon a recent re-read of Episode Zero, I realized that Duo had been legally adopted by Father Maxwell, so Duo was his son and "Maxwell" is his legal name. I don't know why, but I'd assumed that Duo had started calling himself "Duo Maxwell" after the destruction of the church.

Duo's plea at the end for Trowa to help him "save them" could refer to his gang members who died in the plague or the Maxwell Church Tragedy that killed Sister Helen and Father Maxwell... or all of them.

Holy Helen. Pinky's use of this phrase won't be explored in depth, but there will be more in the coming chapters about how Sister Helen and Father Maxwell interacted with the res-den gangs.
I can hear him. Trowa. His voice is the only steady moment — the only thing I can hold onto in a shaky existence. I open my eyes. My face is mashed into a gray T-shirt. Lights are on. Where are we?

My body shakes. My mind slips and skids. Am I breathing? What’s upside-down? The nightmares shimmer and swell at the edge of my sight. Ghosts loom over me. Shinigami’s maw drips with the congealed blood of the people I’ve lost. The ones I’d let down. The deaths I’d caused.

I am the God of Death.

No, please, no.

Trowa? Are you there? Please be there. Please—

“Duo. I’m right here. Can you feel my hand in yours?”

So that’s what that sensation is: warm fingers threading between mine. No one’s ever held my hand like this before. I like it.

No!

I jerk my hand away from his because he’s too close and if I don’t let him go now, he’ll pay the ultimate price. Acid in my veins. Someone’s out of breath. Panting hard. Black spots dance and swirl at the edge of my vision.

“No! I’m not letting you go!”

“Duo, it’s all right. Let me hold on.”

No. Never. No matter how bad I want him to. I can’t let him. I squeeze my eyes shut as a shudder races through me. A clicking sound. Teeth chattering? Mine or his? “Don’t—don’t—”

My tenuous grip on reality slips. Evaporates. I tumble into darkness and trip into the horror that is my memories.

“The Maxwell Church has offered to take you in. Be grateful!”
No. I won’t. You can’t make me.

“See? You’re not smelly at all.”

Oh, God. Kindness hurts.

“Just one mobile suit—!”

Stop. I’m begging you.

“No matter what happens, we must not fight.”

Too late. Too late!

“M-may you... have God’s... blessing...”

Why? Why, God damn it, why?

“Didya know that kid’s a Maxwell Church survivor?”

“Wow... guess he cut a deal with Death, huh?”

I am Death. The God of Death. Everyone who touches me, sees me is—

Screams. So many screams.

The silence burns. So much.

Trowa? Are you there? Trowa? Trowa!

“I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

No, he has to. He has to! “Go. Run.”

Trowa, the contrary asshole, pulls me even closer. Layers of fabric in between and around us, but I can feel how warm he is. He’s not dead yet. There’s still time.

“It’s all right.”

But it’s not. It’s really not. I can feel Death leering at him over my shoulder, through my eyes, grinning out of my smile. Am I lying down? In Trowa’s bed? Oh, God. What have I done? Is it too late to save him? It can’t be. I push against his shoulders. Distance. He needs distance. His life depends on it. “What are you doing with me, Trowa? I’m... I—I could—”

“You won’t.”

“But I could.”

Trowa manhandles me closer, grabbing my chin and—how did I end up nose-to-nose with him? His eyes are so green. Unreal. He stares me down. This is a dream, right? So it’s cool.

“I won’t let you, Duo,” he murmurs, confusing me. What are we talking about? “You won’t.”

Death. Right. Of course. “But I’m—you don’t understand! Shinigami—he’s real.” He’s me. “A killer. They’re all dead because of me. You just—you don’t understand!”

“I do. I do understand. It’s going to be all right, Duo. You’re going to be all right.” Trowa firmly,
almost roughly, caresses my back and shoulders as if trying to warm me. Jesus. He still hasn’t figured out that it’s a losing battle. Once Death has touched you, that’s it. You’re stone cold.

I twist, shove, squiggle. The world spins. My stomach lurches into my throat.

“Stop pushing me away,” he pleads on a murmur. “Pretend I’m someone else if you need to.”

What a moron. “I’m not gonna do that to you. Idiot.” It wouldn’t make a difference to Death, anyway. That bastard’s sight is twenty-twenty.

Death laughs in my face. I cringe.

A soft touch in my hair. “Sister Helen?”

A masculine hum vibrates against my ear. “Father?”

In a sudden moment of terrible weakness, the cold black steals over me. The nightmares—the daymares, the horror in its totality, all of my sins—they dog my heels, waiting for me to trip up. If I look back over my shoulder, I’ll see it all: the terrifying, unforgivable reality of what I’ve done.

A sound rises up from my throat. A whimper. “Trowa?”

“I’m right here, Duo.”

I grab a fistful of his shirt.

“I’m not going anywhere. I swear. Just listen to the sound of my voice. You’re all right. I’ve got your back. You’re safe…”

Trowa’s tone is soothing. His promises nonsensical. Most of the words are stupid, obvious statements. But I cling to sound of his voice and the solid heat of his body as we huddle into the warmth of the sleeping bag. The heater needs a new fuel cell.

“You’re safe. You’re fine. I’m here. And I’m not leaving, Duo. I’m not leaving…”

The gentle murmur of Trowa’s perfect but obnoxious promise wraps around me and I freefall into the dark, inescapable cage of sleep.

Darkness.

Shadows.

Torment.

A small cry wakes me. It pokes out of my horror-locked throat with enough force to push me toward consciousness and awareness so sharp it slices right through me, steals my breath as it informs me of one inescapable fact: I’m not alone.

There’s a body beside mine, crowding me on a strange bed.

Oh, God, no—what is—?

My training surges forward, shoving aside my panic and—

The long, strong body stirs. Air puffs against my face and I smell him. Familiar. Trusted. Trowa.
The soldier in me shuts off.

Trowa is in bed with me. Snuggled up against me.

Somewhere indoors.

With electricity. Lights on.

Right. I remember bits and pieces of… something recent.

OK. So. I’m not on the verge of losing my shit anymore, but I’ve got no clue what to do next.

“Are you awake?” Trowa breathes.


“We’re safe for now. You were hit with a sweet dreams dart.”

Grabbing onto the nearest bits of him, I cling to Trowa’s arms. Rear back and scan his face. He looks tired but wired. “You’re OK?”

“Yes. And so are you.”

I wait for him to fill me in. Stare at him hard. His Adam’s apple bobs once.

“You and I—” Trowa hesitates — fucking hesitates — and I feel the chill of panic rising, pushing against my skin. Whoo-buddy does that wake me up! Adrenaline beats coffee any day of the week.

I tense up, clutching him tight as I scan the room in search of enemies and exits alike.

Trowa tells me, “We were attacked. Outside the laundromat service door.”

Yup. That part is mostly clear. I also remember telling him to get his pretty ass out of there. “And?”

“They took you. While I was fighting.”

Fighting. What the hell had happened to running? Jesus Christ.

The look on my face shuts him up. He stops. Swallows thickly. Presses his forehead against my neck and hides. “I went to the gang near the church ruins. I’d dealt with them before. We got you out.”

“You… got me out. With the help of a fucking gang? Are you shitting me, Trowa?!”

He flinches. Maybe I shouldn’t have shouted so loud, but damn it…!

“It was all I could think of.”

I… I… I’ve got nothing. Holy hell. Whatever shit he’d done had obviously worked. Insofar as it has kept my ass off a slaver’s ship, which this room is clearly not.

I sigh.

Trowa takes that as permission to tuck me against his side and I let him. Just… fuck it. I close my eyes. His hand rubs down my arm and over my back.

My throat aches. I’d kill for some refiltered water, but I put it off. “Out of where?”
He knows exactly what I mean: “Monch’s territory. His people are slave traders.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him that, under the right set of shitty circumstances, all the gangs dabble in skin-hunting. Your first priority is to your gang. You do what you gotta do for their sake. Even at the expense of the innocent.

Drawing a shaky breath, I demand, “Whose territory are we on now?”

“Pinky’s.”

The name isn’t familiar.

“I think he wants something from you,” Trowa warns me. “He said you were the last of Maxwell’s kids.”

“You told him my name.” It isn’t a question.

“Yes.”

Well, fuck.

“Was that a mistake?” he asks, his tone a strange mix of softness and rage.

“A complication. I’m… infamous.”

I can feel Trowa’s lips curve into a smile against my skin. “I figured the last part out for myself.”

He’s so not as smart as he thinks he is. God damn it. Someone groans. I think it might be me.

I wouldn’t have thought it was possible for Trowa to wrap himself even tighter around me, but that’s exactly what he does. I don’t have the strength to push him away. I try, but I fail. God damn sweet dreams shit. At least I can think now.

Trowa’s arms squeeze me in a brief, genuine embrace. “Get some more rest.”

“Not gonna happen,” I reply.

He exhales shakily.

“What’s up, man?”

I can practically hear him working through how to reply. If it takes this long for him to run contingencies, then whatever it is must be epically awful. I start to pull away, and that’s when I notice the fine tremor in his hands. The subtle twitch of his shoulders.

“You asshole. You’re mashing.”

He doesn’t deny it. He lifts an arm and checks his watch. “Thirteen hours left. Give or take.”

“The hell. Did you down the whole damn vial in one go?”

“Yes.”

“Are you fucking insane?” Again with the shouting. What the hell is wrong with me? Heero Perfect Yuy hadn’t been able to rile me up this bad. Not even on his best — or my worst — day. Ditto for Wufei “the Master of Meditation” Chang.
“They got me, too, Duo. Through the sleeping bag, in the shoulder. Probably not a full dose. Zipline was all I could think might counter it.”

If he’s telling the truth, then that could mean only one thing: “How long have you been carrying masher around with you?”

“Since the afternoon I arrived. I knew I had to watch my back here.”

Fair enough. I’m not dumb enough to ask why he hadn’t offered to share it with me, but… I consider the Allie bag, the cook-set, the sanitize gel. All army surplus items that can be purchased from the downtown dealer who also sells high grade stimulants. What are the odds that Trowa would get the exact same things I had? Right down to the stuff in the plastic vial?

“Truth time, Barton,” I ultimatum, “or I’m not gonna bother to wipe your ass after the first wave is done with you.”

“I wiped yours.”

My hands fist. “How the hell did you get your hands on masher from the same jerk I did?”

He doesn’t even deny it. Maybe he wants to come clean. Maybe he’s been waiting for me to challenge him. To care enough to challenge him. Sonuvabitch. “I showed him your photo. Asked for whatever you’d bought.”

“And just what made you think I’d need masher?”

He looks me in the eye. “Maybe you needed to watch your back.”

OK, I’ll let that one slide. But not the other: “You have a picture of me. Lemme see it.”

With a heavy exhalation, he rolls off the low pallet and crosses the room. Kneels and paws through the pockets of a pair of grimy jeans. Shit. What the hell kind of rescue operation would put so much filth on his clothes? And blood. Lots and lots of blood.

Trowa returns to the bed and perches on the edge. Holds out the small, color image.

I grab it. “Where did you get this?”

“Your Preventers file. Wufei sent it.”

My what? I blink. Smirk. And, when it really hits me, I throw back my head and laugh. “I got a file?”


“Best news I’ve heard in a long time.” How messed up is that? I find out that a global and inter-space peacekeeping force has an official file on me and it makes me happy? Happy that someone, somewhere actually gives a shit.

My smile fades. Someone, right here in this windowless interrogation room, gives a shit, too. A pretty big one. “You were looking for me.” I hand the photo back before I wind up crushing it in my fist.

“Yes.”

“The construction work bit was a line.”
“Not entirely.”

I arch a brow. “Leaving the circus?” I prompt.

“I did leave.”

Jesus Christ, this guy. “Why?”

He knows what I’m asking. He looks down at the picture in his shaky hands, hands that are itching for a knife to wield or a trigger to pull, and then scans the room. “Why not?”

Infuriating, passive-aggressive jerk. I try another angle. “You followed me.”

“I found the memorial. I showed this—” He waves the photo once. “—to Pinky. He’d seen you visit the ruins almost daily. I waited for short while until you showed up.”

Which means he’d also walked my route to the Alliance base. And then, outside the store, he — “You planned to bump into me. It wasn’t a coincidence.”

“Few things that appear to be actually are.”

I look away before he can catch my gaze. I let him stare at me for a long moment before I roll to my feet. “The fuck is this place?”

“Basement of an apartment building across from the old church.”

“We locked in?” I ask just before I see his low-tech security system. Nice.

“We can leave anytime. No one can get in.”

“Suicide room,” I grumble. But, considering the condition I’d been in, this had probably been the safest place for us. Well, the safest place in the res-den.

“Hungry?”

“Yeah.” I find and use the john. Wash up with freezing water. There’s food of a sort — military rations of unknown, smeared-inked dates — and a jug of refiltered water waiting on the bed when I get back.

I sit down on the opposite side of the pallet. We eat. Re-hydrate.

As Trowa clears away the wrappers and tins, I mumble, “I might have said some shit. While I was out of it earlier.”

“No, you didn’t.”

I’m pretty damn sure I had. Frowning, I study his face. Dissect what I can see of it as he brusquely washes the used containers up in the metal sink and sets them aside to dry. Everything is recycled on colonies. Everything.

He turns and leans against the counter, bracing himself in a slouch with a hand beside either hip. Open. Non-threatening. “You made some noise, but I expected you would. That’s why I asked for a room like this. I knew you’d fight your way back.”

The muscles over my heart strain, pull together, ache.
He repeats, “It was just noise. Without your knowledge or consent, it’s just noise.”

My God. Why is he giving this to me? After the veritable smorgasbord of nightmare fodder he’d undoubtedly heard, he’s not even going to do, say, think, or ask anything about it?

“I don’t understand.”

He ducks his head. Drums his fingers against the edge of the counter. Flexes and curls his sock-covered toes. Trowa Barton fidgets.

Just goes to show how a full vial of masher can fuck you up.

He says, “You did the same for me.”

“When was this?”

“When I couldn’t remember who I was. I said some things. Didn’t say others. You never held it against me.”

Oh. Damn. I haven’t got a clue what to say. I check my watch. It’s nearly seven in the morning. “We should get to Jamesson’s.” At his startled look, I remind him, “It’d be a shame to waste all that masher just futzing around here.”

“I’ll have to speak to Pinky. Thank him.” He winces.

He doesn’t enjoy the prospect of owing anybody anything. I can relate.

With a snort, I grab for my backpack. Unzipping the main pocket, I’m shocked to find everything in here just as it had been the last time I’d seen it. Except for the bread. That had gotten smashed at some point, but whatever. The new shape won’t make it taste any worse. Or better, for that matter.

Ignoring the book and the whiskey bottle, I pull out some fresh clothes and sanitizer. I need to feel clean. Right now.

“This Pinky dude won’t forget the score.” I glance Trowa’s way. “Get dressed. We’ve got work to do today.” Still, he doesn’t move. Shaking my hair loose, I roll my eyes at him. “I’m positive that if he’s got something to say, he knows where to find us.”

Trowa grabs his duffel and turns away to give me privacy. That doesn’t surprise me. But I wouldn’t have minded if he’d wanted to watch. Unfortunately, that doesn’t surprise me, either.

Chapter End Notes

Duo’s italicized flashbacks (in quotation marks) are taken from the Episode Zero manga:
(1) the colony officials or workers show up to evict Duo’s gang from the house they’re squatting in,
(2) Sister Helen soothes and embraces an 8-year-old Duo after the kids at school provoke him (by telling him he smells bad) until he beats them up (sending at least one kid to the hospital),
(3) the rebel leader recklessly wishes for a mobile suit after his troops (who are on the
run from the Alliance) invade the church,
(4) Father Maxwell tries to talk the rebels down (but this fails to convince anyone to
stand down),
(5) Sister Helen’s farewell to Duo (when he returns to find the church in smoldering
ruins), and
(6) the jail/brig/detention cell guards (in this fic, I say they're Alliance soldiers) discuss
Duo’s escape from the Maxwell Church tragedy.
...DUO...

The building is quiet when we emerge from the basement. Trowa collects the twine he’d, um, “borrowed” from my hip pocket and carefully winds it up the same way he’d seen me do it. Handing it over, he moves to the front door and leans out into the hall.

I move toward the nearest window to take a peek outside. Get ready to bust us outta here if necessary.

With the hand that can’t be seen from the other side of the threshold, Trowa signals for me to be on the alert. “Drege,” Trowa greets quietly.

“Yo, fook. Your boss jacking a thing?”

My eyes just about pop out of my head when Trowa merely shrugs off the offer. “We have places to be. If Pinky wants a word before we go, now would be the time.”

The floor squeaks softly as Drege moves closer. Not close enough for me to get a look at him, though. “Naw, you pair are lock. Just don’t stick your schedule to the wall next few rotations. Business be what, you knock?”

“If he needs me, I doubt I’ll be difficult to find. Not without a good reason.”

“Walk on, 03.”

Having been given the guard’s blessing to excuse ourselves from Pinky’s hospitality, I join Trowa at the door. Drege is just about as big, bad, and scarred up as I’d expected for gang muscle. I nod to him. He nods to me. Trowa gestures me out the front door. Drege shuts it behind us.
I don’t say a word about the fact that Drege — and, presumably, the rest of the gang — knows who
Trowa is and what he’d done during the war. That kind of shit tends to come out during serious
negotiations.

However, I wait until we’re on a solid safeline, out in the open with a comfortable buffer between us
and the nearest pedestrians, to check something else kinda-sorta-maybe important, “Drege called us a
pair. Called me your boss. You do know what that means around here, don’t you?”

He shrugs. “A guy who prefers to call the shots and be on top, I imagine.”

His tone is way too casual for him to have a clue. “Um... kind of, er…” Fuck. How to say this?
And why the hell had I volunteered to explain?

Because I’m a moron, that’s why.

“I meant,” Trowa continues and I’ll be damned if there isn’t a cute, little smile on his face. “A guy
who likes all that... with his boyfriend.”

I punch him in the arm. Retaliating and burning off some of my own embarrassment at the same
time. I can multitask with the best of them.

We take another half dozen steps in silence.

“If it bothers you,” Trowa says quietly with no inflection whatsoever, “I’ll set the record straight.”

Obviously, it doesn’t bother Trowa. The dude’s not even blushing. I sure as hell am, but not
because I’m upset about it. Those green eyes fix their gaze on me and I know I can’t deny my
reaction. The only card I’m holding is whether my thoughts on the matter are “for” or “against."

I admit to nothing: “Doesn’t matter. Your call.”

Trowa lifts a brow in eloquent silence. Really? he doesn’t ask.

I shrug.

His cute little smile is back for an encore and my own grin feels softer than it should. Damn it, am I
flirting with Trowa Barton? I think I am.

And I think he’s just figured it out, too. His hands are in his pockets, but his elbow brushes against
my sleeve. The guy totally doesn’t mind that I’d just bounced the ball over to his half of the court.

Jamesson arrives on site and spots Trowa and I already hard at work with Ron and Matt, loading up
the plastics in the truck. Just like nothing unusual had happened the night before. Or during the
walk here this morning.

As the truck lumbers off, the reverend glances at our pile of personal items and frowns. “You seem
to be missing a sleeping bag, gentlemen.”

Trowa and I share a smirk at the “gentlemen” thing. Jamesson is always calling us that. Jesus. If
only he knew. I say, “Er, yeah. Mine wandered off. I was out late and... y’know how easy it is to
lose track of things.”

“Last night must have been… difficult.”

“It was,” Trowa confirms. “He kicks in his sleep.”
“Dude, I am sorry.”

“My shins didn’t hear you.”

The reverend butts in on a chuckle, “Would you like to replace it now? I can give T.W. a hand when the truck returns for the rest of the scrap.”

Trowa answers for me, “Don’t worry about us. We’ll pick up another at lunch.”

So, after Ron and Matt make a second and final appearance of the morning to haul off all the rubber scrap along with the last of the metal and stone, that’s what Trowa and I do.

Jamesson catches a ride with the guys to talk to the plant manager about his order for building materials — hey, a church has gotta have walls and shit — and Trowa promises that we’ll look in on the boarding house daily at eight a.m. to see if a delivery is imminent.

I almost ask him if he’s got a turd in his pocket because I sure as shit won’t be making that morning hike with him. Come to think of it, he’d damn well better not hang out on this piece-of-shit can all on his lonesome. Thirty-odd hours from now, he’s not going to have anyone here to watch his back. He needs to accept it and just let it go. Let me go.

It’s probably a mistake to let it slide, but I’m fucking tired of arguing with him.

I head into the army surplus shop all on my own while Trowa waits on the curb outside, ignoring the pedestrians and irreverently fixing us some lopsided sandwiches. With my new sleeping bag bouncing over my shoulder, we make the walk back to the res-den, chewing our way through more peanut butter on many-days-old meal bread.

“You do hate peanut butter sandwiches,” I point out. Trowa quirks his visible eyebrow at me. I smirk. “I can tell.”

“I hate skipping meals more.”

“Amen to that.”

I finish my lunch and brush the crumbs from my hands. We take another couple of steps. I listlessly pick at my fingernails, keeping an eye open for a good place to crash for the night. I’ve even got enough time to find the valve on the water main and crank it open. It would be real nice to have running water and a functioning toilet.

Turning onto another safeline, I glance back over my shoulder. A hulking figure has been following us for a couple of blocks. Matching our steps. Subtly herding us in the general direction of the Maxwell Church. Hmm. Looks like Pinky would like a word after all.

Unless Drege has an identical twin brother. In which case, all bets are off.

But it is Drege — scars like that don’t generally come in matching sets — and he falls into step beside us the moment Trowa and I pass into Pinky’s territory.

Pinky’s muscle man gives me a nod in greeting.

I nod in return. It’s enough of an invitation to get to the point of this little stalker act.

Drege informs me that I’ve been invited to a gathering of gang leaders on neutral turf.

Trowa says nothing, but that could simply be because Drege hadn’t bothered to make an effort to be
understood by someone with limited exposure to our street lingo.

“Just a hank,” I tell Pinky’s minion, stopping in the street — ignoring the few passers-by, other scouts from Pinky’s gang and the like — to face Trowa. “There’s a meeting soon. Pinky arranged it. We’re squared up with him if I go. Say my piece.”

Trowa nods in understanding. “Not without me.”

I study his expression. The look in his eyes is deadly. I want him there, not even going to pretend that I don’t, but there will be rules. “Try not to kill anyone.”

“If they don’t try to hurt you, it won’t be an issue.”

Damn, but he says the sweetest things. I tell him, “Don’t try to get between me and the leaders.”

Ah, he doesn’t like that one.

With narrowed eyes, he allows, “So long as they don’t give me a reason.”

Well, we’re on a bowl of a roll now, aren’t we? I hit him with Rule Number 3, “Don’t say a word, unless it’s to me, and don’t whisper. Got it?”

Interestingly, he has zero trouble with that one. “Got it,” he agrees.

I give him a grateful smile and a long look starting at his green eyes — both the one that’s visible and the other one that’s behind those stupid bangs — and down across his shoulders, powerful chest, and strong arms. I’d felt his strength in a very up-close and personal way this morning. I make an impressive effort to keep my attention above the waist, grinning hard when I manage it.

But then, spying Trowa’s subtly twitching fingers, I frown. Check my watch. “Status?” I ask quietly, reverting to wartime jargon.

He fists his hands, rolls his shoulders, stretches his neck to the left and right. The routine confirms my suspicions that this isn’t the first time Trowa has mashed. I wonder if he’s ever detoxed, though, and how bad it had gotten. He’d certainly known what to do for me.

Trowa reports, “T-four-hundred.”

Four hours and counting ‘til he crashes. “Ten-four,” I acknowledge.

My shoulder bumps Trowa’s arm as I turn around and meet Drege’s quizzical look with a grin. The guy might look as dumb as he is huge, but he ain’t. There’s no way he can be: the idiots get weeded out pretty quick ’round the res-den.

“Scout up, Drege,” I invite with a showy gesture.

Wordlessly, he shows us the way. When we come upon the final corner, I sneak a finger into the front pocket of Trowa’s jeans and give the fabric a smart tug. He drops back half a step and stays there on my left, looming just out of the corner of my eye. Perfect.

Drege takes up a post on the street corner, leaving Trowa and I to finish the journey in silence. I briefly think of my last visit to this patch of misery. I allow the memories in, the voices, the pain. And then I exhale it all into the cold, still air.

*I’ll come back for you,* I promise my ghosts. I’ve got something like thirty hours before my week is up. After that, there’ll be plenty of time to confront the dead. This afternoon, though, my focus is on
the living.

It might seem strange to hold a gathering of gang leaders in the middle of a day cycle, but there’s less chance of the cops coming by; nothing worth their attention happens in the res-den until after dark. Collection time used to happen right around dawn. I’m not sure if that’s how things still work here, but luckily it’s not my problem. If it’s not safe for the shot-callers to be here, they won’t come.

I kinda hope this is gonna be a no-show, to be honest.

But it’s not.

As soon as I set foot on the ruins, I detect movement from each of the safelines that intersect here. The gang leaders and their seconds-in-command approach. They move in silence, gathering in front of the memorial plaque. Nods of acknowledgment are exchanged in edgy silence.

When no one seems inclined to do the talking, I figure it’s up to me to move things along. Trowa and I are on a schedule.


I recognize Jebb. I’d gotten into a couple of scraps with one of his runners, Oscalo, once upon a time. Both of us had gotten scars to show for it. I don’t ask where Oscalo is now. If he’s still around or what.

Morisa’s voice is familiar, but she’s easily ten years older than me. We’d probably passed each other in the twilight at some point when I’d still had my run of the streets.

Darl, I know. Though his face is too scarred now for me to recognize him on sight. When I’d last seen him, he’d been real pretty. “Angel,” we’d all called him. I can imagine how and why he’d lost his good looks. A torn up face is a sure way to lose the interest of persistent skin hunters.

And then there’s Pinky, who seems to know me, but I can honestly say I’ve never seen the fook before. We’re about the same age. Maybe he’s a year or so younger. But, hell, it’s not like we’d all sat in a circle singing camp songs back in the day, so it’s no surprise that I can’t draw up a memory of him.

I thank everyone for coming. When Pinky doesn’t step in to take control of the meeting, I assume that I’m the one who has, er, called it. Officially, anyway.

“A token,” I demand, spreading my arms wide, palms up, indicating the hallowed ground on which we stand. “Of Father Maxwell or Sister Helen. A token for the fallen.”

I go first. “Sister Helen skilled me right onto twine my vain.” All eyes focus on my braid. Yes, Sister Helen had taught me how to weave it neatly.

Jebb offers his memory, telling us of the time Father Maxwell had caught him sleeping under the white table cloth of the altar during mass, passed him a bit of bread after the morning service was concluded, and coaxed him to the kitchen for some soup.

Morisa confesses to stealing a set of silver candlesticks and pawning them… only to catch sight of Father Maxwell buying them back from the shop owner later that same day. This had gone on three times before Morisa had screwed up her courage and demanded that the father pay her directly for not stealing them. As her proposal had been cheaper than the pawn broker’s price, he’d happily agreed… provided she had kept their business arrangement to herself.
Darl shares moments spent with Sister Helen. She’d kept a small herb garden for stocking the infirmary and, to this day, he’s never seen so many different kinds of living plants.

Pinky admits to never meeting either of them, but his mother had been taken in by the church and Pinky himself had been born there. There’s more to Pinky’s story, I’m sure. Chapters and chapters of a tale to be told, but not here. Not now.

I stay the course I’d set. I tell them Jamesson’s name, which I’m sure they already know. I share with them what I’d already told the reverend about the way things work in the res-den. The fact that the guy hasn’t tucked tail and run back to L3 is a testament to his strength of conviction.

“Rotations off, one good fella turns many more,” I predict, my dark tone at odds with the optimistic statement, “plus all the recollected goods and what. Pay it on and play it out. If you ain’t gonna lock it, sing out now.”

Everyone digests that in silence, imagining a future that is better than the present. Perhaps even a return to better times. Yes, Jamesson is only one man, but his success will bring others. Eventually, the res-den will have all the public services that it had once had. It all depends on how much of an effort the gangs are willing to make in support of what is undoubtedly a long shot. So if anyone has any doubts or objections, now is the time to raise them.

“The reds are the iss,” Darl points out correctly: the colony police won’t appreciate any cooperation between the gangs that they currently extort money and favors from. Plus, any headway that Jamesson makes in improving the quality of life here will give the gangs less incentive to rustle and gang up the unwary. Any change in the dynamics of the res-den could affect the reds’ collection business. That’ll be tolerated for all of about five fucking minutes before the reds target the church itself.

Jebb nods. “You knock we jack to hand in...”

Yeah, I know they wanna help Jamesson build his church — offer a hand with the labor — but they can’t. Anyone seen helping out at the church building site will disappear and their gang will be punished. “And get red-marked on it,” I needlessly finish Jebb’s thought.

“You got word with the good fella?” Pinky checks.

“You knock I do, fook.”

He grins.

I promise to speak to the reverend. Everyone agrees to meet again to work out how each gang will support the new church in whatever capacity most suitably undetectable.

It’s when we get to the part where I need a safe, dependable way of getting a message to the leaders that I make a stupid mistake. I could blame it on my concern for Trowa, who is nearing the end of his strength, and my need to get him tucked away in a secure place. I could blame it on being absent from the res-den for so many years. Hell, I could blame it on having worked with a team at the end of the war or having grown used to an atmosphere of cooperation at the salvage and scrapyard.

But the truth is that I’d started to think that maybe, if these four could put their differences aside — if they could willfully forget all the bad blood and betrayal between them — then their lieutenants would follow along. But of course they don’t. They can’t. It’s their job to defend the gang’s honor when the leader’s hands are tied on neutral territory.

I say, “I’ll work word ‘round by Drege, who—”
Jebb’s second-in-command stiffens. “Fook, you even knock the shiz and what that pipe-sucker run off on?”

Morisa’s guard snarls, “Go piss, Brick. The shiz you graft on some sad fook to call it all-one—”

Darl’s man jumps in, not about to miss the opportunity to speak his mind to one or more of his rivals.

Insults fly fast, furious, and instantly forgettable. Until a comment is made about a rival roamer being motherless; apparently, he’d hatched out of a dead, feral cat’s ass as a cockroach and proceeded to cock-suck his way up the food chain. OK, yeah. Like I’ve never heard that one before.

Despite its lack of originality, it manages to piss off its intended target.

Blades flash.

Including Trowa’s. I spy the tremor that shakes the edge of his knife and know we don’t have time for this hot air to blow itself out. “Enough!” I bark. “Down, back, and gone.”

One by one, each leader follows my example, lifting a hand and gesturing for their loyal lieutenants to put a lid on it.

“I spoke up-down and out,” I apologize. “Word will pass through personal.” I’ll contact the scouts in each territory myself. ”So long as hospitality is genuine.”

Four heads nod.

I conclude the meeting, sparing a thought for warning them about Monch’s encroachment into other territories for skin hunting, but in the end I keep my mouth shut. Mentioning Monch will only bring politics into this as I’m pretty sure the fucker’s roamers had taken us down in Morisa’s territory and, obviously, Pinky had managed to find himself in a position to help us out. Accusations of Morisa being unable to handle her own turf — or getting a cut from Monch’s skin business — won’t help the church. At all. Neither will Pinky’s smug posturing and the implication that I owe him for helping my boy-ya get me back safe and sound.

Sweet Jesus. How is Trowa OK with the toughest gangs on the colony thinking that he likes bending over for me? I just… how?

*Think about it later.*

Yes, absolutely. Let’s do that.

All five parties — Trowa and myself, included — back away with empty hands raised, turning and disappearing down the nearest safeline as soon as our feet cross to the sidewalk.

I lead Trowa past Drege, who escorts us to the edge of Pinky’s territory, and then I dodge and weave through darkening streets. Time to find a place for the night, preferably a place with running water. We’ll need it for what’s coming.

Detox, the sequel.

Chapter End Notes
Pregnancy in space. This is an issue in Quatre’s family history. According to Episode Zero, all of Quatre’s 29 sisters were created in and born from “test tubes.” Quatre believes that’s true for him as well, but actually, his mother chose to carry him to term and she died during or shortly after childbirth. In the After Colony era, natural childbirth was prohibited in space. I assume this means pregnant women would have to return to Earth to have their babies (an expensive and stressful trip). Certainly, birth control methods were practiced in space, but a lot of people on Duo’s home colony have slipped through the cracks. Pinky’s mother was one of them. She gave birth in space because she couldn’t afford either the contraceptive methods or the shuttle fare to Earth. I don’t say that she died. I don’t think the fatality rate for mothers was 100%, but it was probably really high, which is why natural childbirth in space was not allowed. That’s my take on it in this fic.

As I was re-writing “Shinigami Sleeps,” I got to the point that featured the construction of a new church on Duo’s home colony, symbolizing a rebuilding of faith, and it seemed a shame not to enhance that here.

Duo’s role as a mediator is inspired by the story of a famous Japanese man named Ryoma Sakamoto who lived during the mid 1800’s. He’s said to have been very charming and charismatic. Orphaned, he’d been taken in and raised by his mother’s family (who were low-ranking samurai from the Shikoku area, then called “Tosa”). At this time in Japanese history, two rival warlords (from “Satsuma” and “Choshu”) had been incapable of ceasing hostilities between their people. Due to pride, these warlords could not meet and discuss the issue civilly. They needed an intermediary. (This is not an uncommon situation: two “big men” who cannot negotiate peacefully without a neutral third party or intermediary.) Enter Ryoma. He successfully negotiated an end to years and years of fighting before going on to do other amazing things, but this aspect of his life is what gave me the idea to cast Duo as a negotiator between the rival gangs.

The memories that each of the gang leaders shares are not supported by Episode Zero. I just came up with some stuff.

I have no idea what Father Maxwell’s first name was, so I picked Eugene. And after looking it up, I see that it is a name shared by several saints and a couple of popes. So, okie dokie. As for Sister Helen, I added a “Mary” to her name because this is traditional (for some, but not all orders of nuns). I’m not in any way an expert on Catholicism or its traditions, but if Father Maxwell gets a first name, then I wanted Sister Helen to have one more name, too. For the sake of balance.
Detoxing Nightmares

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: language (as always), bodily functions (throwing that in here just to be safe), suicidal thoughts (yup, Duo could win the Olympic gold in Stubborn), drug detox (and, therefore, implied drug use)


Music rec: “Monster” by Boondox (Thanks, Ry! Perfect music rec is PERFECT.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

...DUO...

I hope I don’t fuck this up. Living through masher detox once doesn’t mean I know jack shit about helping someone else get through it. Yeah, I’d heard stories about crashing on masher, but hell, that shit is expensive. Most folks in the res-den can’t afford it on a regular basis and anyone who ends up detoxing does so within the safety of the gang HQ.

I vividly remember pure fucking agony and shaking so hard it’s a miracle that my muscles hadn’t been ripped right off my bones. The sensation of being tied up and held down is less clear. I vaguely recall the smell of shit and urine. But I have no memory of a single specific thing that Trowa had done or how he’d done it.

“What are you gonna need?” I ask as I look over a house situated behind a large garage. Boarded up windows, check. Multiple exits, check. I’m liking this one.

As I move to investigate, Trowa quietly lists, “A toilet, functioning or not, and a secure room nearby.”

I don’t ask why he hadn’t just left me on the floor in the bathroom during my detox; the bathrooms in these old houses are frickin’ filthy. Like, the-second-coming-of-the-plague filthy.

“This gonna get loud?”

“If I’m tied up and held down, no.”

I try to remember: “Did I make a lot of noise?”

“No. It’s hard to get enough air to breathe let alone speak.”

OK, then. That explains why anything beyond my own skin had been so impossible to process. So. Maybe this place will do the trick. I gesture for Trowa to hang back and keep his eyes open while I take a look indoors. I don’t see much garbage and there’s a thick layer of grime where there should be, but I do find two worrisome things: a discarded, empty pack of store-bought smokes and the smear of a shoe print in the corner of the kitchen behind the door. I can tell it’s a boot, good tread.
Only professional skin hunters or the colony police can afford shit like imported cigarettes and new boots.

I emerge from the place and signal Trowa with a shake of the head. We hop the privacy fence and keep moving.

The next house I consider is too open: the back door hangs on its hinges and too few windows still have panes in their casings.

The apartment building after that already has semi-permanent residents. I can smell the stale sweat in the air as I’m standing in the foyer. Nope. Not this one.

We’re running out of time and I’m seriously considering going against my better judgment and returning to the house that I’d detoxed in when I find something that will work. It looks like any other house from the front, but there’s a long hallway from one of the bedrooms that leads to what had once been a whorehouse. The mattresses are long gone, but the metal bed frames had been left behind. Each small room shares a bathroom with its neighbor, which is a lovely escape bonus. There are no windows, but we can’t be picky at this point. Trowa is visibly flagging.

“Do I tie you to a bed frame or just hold on?”

He gives himself a shake, struggling to concentrate on what I’m saying. “Either. Bed frame is messier. Won’t make it to the toilet in time.”

“Holding on, it is.” I know I don’t imagine his look of relief. Jesus. Had he really thought I’d leave him to soil his britches when he’d mashed on my account in the first place? And why am I having such a damn hard time stopping myself from yelling at him over being surprised?

Deep breath in. There we go. When I speak next, my tone is level. “You crashed on masher before?”

“Yes.”

“Who got you through it?”

“Cathy.”

I blink. I hadn’t thought he’d have needed to dose up so recently. Unless… “Were you hooked on it?”

“N-no.”

Well, at least there’s that bit of good news. “How did Cathy get you through it?” She’s no fainting violet, but I can’t picture her restraining a guy as strong as Trowa for long.

“Tied me to a bunk.”

I wince. “Jesus.”

“It was n-nasty,” he agrees, his arms twitching.

I hurry to get everything set up. “Trowa, you have a grand gift for understatement,” I inform him.

He chuckles. Or wheezes out a breath on a full-body tremor. Probably the latter.

“C’mere.”
He does. I get his boots off and tie his shins together with one of my shirts from yesterday. “Sorry,”
I say with a sympathetic look, “I don’t have any clean clothes.”

“N—neither—me. It’s—f—fine.”

Yesterday’s jeans go around his hips, trapping his arms. Trowa coaches me on how to protect his
palms from being cut by his nails. His gray, long-sleeved T-shirt from this morning is what I decide
to use to bind his jaw shut, but I hold off on doing that for some last minute advice: “G-get behind
me. Hold my h-head back so I d-don’t break your nose. Keep your hands away from m-my
mouth.”

“Got it. Ready?” He’s shivering real hard now.

“Y—yes.”

I knot the cotton sleeves at the top of his head and squiggle between him and the wall. My knife is
within easy reach and, if I absolutely have to, I can shove Trowa away to make room for a fight to
happen. I pray no one finds us here because, with Trowa in the sorry shape that he’s in, I’ll have no
choice but to kill them. Even if a trespasser doesn’t mean us harm personally, he or she can still tell
others where we are. That we’re vulnerable.

“OK, Tro. Here we go. I’ve got you, man.” I wrap an arm around his head, pulling his skull back
against my shoulder. My other arm loops over his chest. One leg over his bound arm and hip, the
other I consider threading between his thighs, but I change my mind: if he manages to flip us, he
could break my leg.

God, but it feels good to hold him. If I’d thought being in his arms had been nice, this right here is
effing awesome. Too bad about the circumstances, but that doesn’t stop me from tucking my nose
behind his ear and nuzzling the fine hair there. Jesus, he smells nice.

A sudden yet delicate shiver works its way through his body. Plastered against and around him as I
am, I totally feel it. Is this how detox starts? Or did I just creep him out?

His hips shift in a telling manner: a dude trying to make a little breathing room in his shorts.

Oh, hell. Seriously? “Sorry,” I say again. “My timing could use some work.”

He nods shortly, his breaths turning choppy, and then his whole body tries to curl in on itself. I hold
on. Like I’d promised, I hold on. It’s not easy; he’s taller than me so he’s got more leverage for
exerting his strength, which is damn impressive, but if I’m anything at all, it’s stubborn. He might
end up with finger-shaped bruises, but I am not letting go of him.

The first wave peaks after almost ninety minutes. Ten minutes later, he’s barely trembling. A
whimper has me yanking the knots out of the bindings. I throw his arm over my shoulder and lever
him up, steer him the three paces into the bathroom, strip him hastily from the waist down and sit him
on the stained but empty toilet. He does a fantastic impersonation of a wet noodle as aromatic things
splat and echo. His face is pressed against my belly. His shoulders are twitching. I keep a hold on
his triceps for the sake of balance.

Damn, I’m tired.

A few minutes later, I think he’s done with this room. I dig out the deflated pack of sanitary wipes
from my back pocket. I clean him up as best I can in the darkness with only his flashlight clenched
between my teeth to see by. I maneuver him back into his pants and onto the sleeping bag. Tie him
up. Brace for Round Two.
An hour and change later, I’m back doing the hug-and-shit with him in the bathroom. Every muscle in his body feels like it’s about to fall apart, quaking and shaking with small spasms. An encore of wipes later, I dump him unceremoniously on the sleeping bags and collapse at his side. I blindly hunt up the clothes I’d used for bindings, but Trowa’s trembling hand fumbles for my wrist and pulls my arm over his side before I can get the T-shirt wrapped around his shins again.

“Are we done?” I whisper.

“Done,” he confirms, panting. “Dreams next.”

“Dreams?”

“Night terrors.”

Understanding hits me in a rush. I think of my own just-purchased sleeping bag that I’d unfurled next to his and abandon my plans to get acquainted with it. “OK. It’s OK. I’m not going anywhere.”

His fingers lace with mine. Tighten. I snuggle against his back and wait, determined to soothe him through the night as best I can. With my cheek pressed between his shoulders, I doze, waking every time he jerks, grunts, cringes.

I shake him awake once. Twice. The third time—

“Can I hold you?” he hiccups, his strained whisper broken by dry sobs.

“Yeah, go for it, man.”

He rolls over and curls around me, one knee on top of my thigh, a heavy arm folded over mine. At least he leaves my right side free. Doesn’t try to hold me down. Just in case we have company.

My watch is trapped between our bodies and I don’t know where the illumination button is on Trowa’s despite it and the wrist it’s attached to resting conveniently on top of my stomach. His breaths puff against the side of my neck.

I sigh. I’m never going to fall asleep now. Maybe that’s for the best. He needs rest more than I do. He needs someone to watch his back more than I do. He needs me and I… I’m glad that he’d come to this hellhole of a colony looking for me. I’m glad he’d found me. This past week, though a whole ton of shit had happened, I have no regrets.

Oh, God. It’s been so long since I’ve felt a moment free of regret.

Thanks to Trowa, I can remember what it feels like to be free.

Jesus, I’m in deep shit.

It’s pitch dark in here, but don’t turn on the flashlight. No point. It’ll only advertise our presence if someone comes this far inside. I almost wish someone would. Then I’d have something to do to distract me from the dark.

I close my eyes. It’s always easier to hide that way. Don’t ask me why. It just is.

...DUO...
“Duo?”

I turn around, my breath tangling and twisting in my throat. “Trowa?”

Trowa looks up from the wreckage, cradling the body of an Alliance officer his arms. I know this man. I’ve seen him before. I’ve seen his eyes before. They way they’d looked at me, I’d thought... I’d felt...

But now those eyes are open, staring blindly toward the sooty dome of the colony. The Alliance base is smoldering rubble. As the Maxwell Church had been smoldering rubble.

Trowa clutches the man closer to his chest. Both of them are covered in blood. I can barely make out the short, brown hair, the carefully trimmed mustache, the rank insignia on the officer’s collar.

Trowa watches me as I stare. Very quietly, he asks, “Why?”

I try to swallow. Try to find my voice. I see the pain and the condemnation in Trowa’s eyes. He waits for me to answer, but I know nothing I can say will make up for what I’ve done.

“I didn’t know. I – I thought I was... It was for the church! For the colony!”

His expression closes, freezing me out.

I reach for him. “Please, Trowa! I never thought this would happen! I didn’t—”

“Stop pretending, Duo. You felt no remorse. This was revenge.”

What he says is true. I had done this; I had taken vengeance. “I feel remorse now,” I offer, knowing it’s not enough. Nothing could ever be enough.

“The God of Death feels no such thing,” he states flatly.

I shudder. “No! No, I’m not—”

“You are,” he tells me. His gaze slides away from me and surveys the destruction. “When you did this, you became Shinigami. Didn’t you?”

I sob. Once. “Yes.”

“And Shinigami feels no remorse, does he?”

“No...” I’m not sure if I’m agreeing or begging to differ.

Trowa rises, the soldier’s body draped over his arms. “You are alone,” he says. “You are damned and you will never be with them again.”

And then he turns away.


But I’m alone.

Alone.

Alone.

Alone.
I collapse in the ruins, falling to my hands and knees, feeling the heat of the embers pulse against my blistering skin.

I struggle to let the tears fall, to be human, but I’m not human. Not anymore.

The shades reach for me — not souls, no. These are howling, mindless echoes of rage with an unquenchable thirst for vengeance. I’d taken their lives, their hopes, their future. Now they will take me.

“No!”

I fight them back as they swarm and surround. Scrape the flesh from my body until I am nothing but rage and regret.

They keep coming.

I keep fighting.

I am Shinigami and this is the home I’ve made for myself. This is my Hell.

...DUO...

I come awake with both fisted hands captured, feet kicking. My throat is sore and tight. Cold droplets rain down on my face. A figure looms over me. My training takes over: I shove, twist away, roll out of range. The intruder hits the floor with a soft thump and I scramble over the bedding, tearing my way free of the fabric.

Move.

Go.

Get out.

Run.

Run and never stop running.

I lurch down a hallway, slam out a door, and find myself outside.

Defensible position. Find and take up a solid, defensible position!

But my feet aren’t moving right and I’m stumbling and slumping against a rough wall, scraping my bare hands just before I double over and heave. With each roll and pitch of my belly, I recall one more nugget of reality: I’m on my home colony; I’m taking shelter in an abandoned house; I have a bunk mate, a friend who had gone into battle for me, who watches my back, who wants me to live.

Oh, God. Trowa.

As if I needed a nice, heaping dose of humiliation to round out my week. Damn it all to hell and fuck it sideways.

The nightmares. Of course they’re not gone. Of course not. They never will be.

It’s time to accept the facts.
I’m alone.
The thought rips a hole in my chest. So I think it again:
I’m alone.
This is the way it has to be. After what I’ve done, this is what I deserve.
I’m...

“Duo?”
Warm hands settle on my shoulders.
…fucking terrified.

I shrug away, spitting to get rid of the taste of bile. I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth. I rasp, “Go away.”

“No.”

“Go away, Trowa.” This time the demand is desperate and husky.

“I’m not leaving.”

My entire body coils tight until I’m shaking. Spinning around, I bite out in a deadly whisper, “Just fuck off back to the circus, God damn you!”

“No.”

I’m hurting enough to scream right in his face, but my sense of self-preservation has me hissing instead, “I need to do this myself!”

Gaze so fucking steady it makes me want to shake him, Trowa firmly says, “You’re right. I can’t do this for you. But you don’t have to do it alone.”

“Damn it! I do not want you to see me like this!”

I glare, warning him to back off in silence. My throat is tender from screaming and vomiting and my breathing is fast and raspy. Fuck.

Trowa takes a step forward, and then another, and another… until he’s invading my space, until our bodies are nearly touching. Slowly, Trowa raises his hands and softly touches his fingertips to my jaw. Framing my face so carefully, he captures my complete attention and his vehement whisper shocks me through all the fear and aggression.

“Do not presume to know what it is I see.”

I gape, breathless. Struck dumb and stupid.

“I will not ask you about the nightmares. I will not force you to face them. But I am not leaving.”

Mortifyingly, a small sound escapes my lips. I guess it’s enough of an agreement for Trowa. He pulls me flush against his chest and locks his arms around me. I can’t fight him. Not now. Maybe tomorrow. Tomorrow I’ll do better, resist harder, but for now I just bury my face against his neck and struggle to keep my breathing slow and measured. I’m not ready to fall apart. I’d rather die.
Come this time tomorrow, I’ll get my wish.

Oh, God. I can’t— I don’t—I just want—make everything OK, please.

My hands grasp and seek over Trowa’s bare back and arms. His hair is wet — wet with actual water from our refiltered supply and not sanitize gel. The strands kiss my cheek and jaw. Discarded scraps of plastic sheeting and broken vials crackle underfoot. It’s not until Trowa holds his breath that I realize my lips are moving and I’m muttering the same prayer over and over and over:

“...medon’tleavemedon’tleavemedon’tleave...”

I try to stop. I stutter. I bite my lip, but the words pour out.

Trowa slowly pets my messy, slept-in braid. He lowers his chin, grazes his lips across my cheek until they’re level with my ear, and whispers, “I’m here. I’m here.”

When my arms wrap painfully tight around his waist, he says only, “I’m right here...”

Chapter End Notes

Duo’s dream and the soldier in it are my own invention. More on this soon.

Also, don't get your hopes up quite yet for Duo to see reason (and ALL THE TROWA LOVE). Spoiler alert: backsliding type things happen. Duo is one stubborn turd.
Final Hours

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Somebody’s still planning their own Big Exit (i.e., suicide), 4-letter words (the naughty kind), angst (this is your tissue warning), overwhelming urge to strangle Duo (can’t forget that!)


Music recs: "Kali Ma" by Neck Deep & “What I’ve Done” by Linkin Park

See the end of the chapter for more notes

… DUO …

Twelve hours.

A week ago, the thought would have brought relief.

Now I don’t know what the hell I’m feeling.

Trowa hadn’t said a word this morning when I’d shoved his arms off of me and rolled away from his body heat. I can vaguely recall letting him haul me back into the house last night and I have a hazy recollection of him tucking me into his sleeping bag for an encore of snuggling. Last night, I’d been weak enough to let him.

This morning, I have shit to do. All because of him. It’s a relief to be angry.

Trowa doesn’t try to apologize or placate me. Even better.

He shadows me to the laundromat. The bloodstains and grime probably won’t come out of his clothes completely. It’s the same with people, too, no matter what Father Maxwell used to say.

When the machine’s buzzer sounds, we retrieve our respective clothing. Pack our respective bags. Pay Reverend Jamesson a visit at the boarding house where he’s rooming. He tells us that the recycle center is still working on his order. Shit should be happening on Monday or Tuesday.

“OK. Sounds great. Have a good one!” I chirp and shove Trowa down the front steps before he can make any promises that I end up tacitly agreeing to.


As I chew, I think about last meals. I could insist on treating us both to something halfway decent, but I figure Trowa’s gonna need all the cash he can get for his shuttle ticket off this shithole.

I think about last rites.

Confession. They say it’s good for the soul. Not sure I’ve still got one of those, but maybe I should give it a shot. Jamesson would probably listen if I asked him to. He won’t be able to absolve me
— wrong branch of the Christianity tree — but it’s not like that’s a realistic expectation anyway.

Maybe I can share a bough with Judas. He’d sold out his best friend for gold. I’m guilty of no better.

God, I don’t want to do this, but I know I’ll regret it if I leave it all until the eleventh hour. Trowa’s here and the only other thing I’ve got going on is pulling together some kind of secret agreement between the colony’s four major gangs that lasts longer than a week without insulting anyone.

Yeah, OK. There’s a mark to hit at a hundred meters with a fucking C-ration.

I’d welcome the challenge if I could just get myself to focus, but it’s not happening. Not right now.

Not with Trowa’s knee bumping mine.

I glance at the time. Ten hours.

Trowa lowers his half-eaten sandwich. I’m pretty sure he knows what I’m counting down to, but why the hell is he here at all?

“What do you want from me?” I finally ask. Almost seven days too late.

“I’m not sure,” he answers after a long moment. “I want… the chance to find out what I want from you.”

I shouldn’t have asked. Jesus Christ. I am not gonna cry today. Not today.

Drawing in a deep breath, I regain my metaphorical footing. I ignore Trowa’s request. It’s not gonna happen. It can’t happen. I wish he’d given up already, but it’s clear that he hasn’t and he’s never going to. Trowa is as stubborn as I am. As reckless, too.

Hell, he’d risked his life for the sake of my freedom the night before last. Not that I wouldn’t have been able to get myself out of that crate once I’d come to. Not that I couldn’t have torn up a crew of slavers and taken over their ship. Not that I’m so unimaginative and resourceless that my new “master” would have survived the first twenty-four hours of ownership. That’s not the point. The point is that Trowa had come for me. Not with the intention of killing me, but of freeing me.

He deserves to know the kind of monster he’s spent so much time and energy trying to save.

“Hey,” I hear myself cough out. The word is almost garbled beyond recognition.

“...hey,” Trowa answers as I work the lump of pain and rage down past my vocal chords.

Clearing my throat, I suggest, “Take a walk?”

“Sure.”

I nod and stand. Turn us around. Head back to downtown. That’s where this sorry tale begins. Sort of.

Emerging onto the main drag, I suck in a fortifying breath. If I’m gonna say this, then I might as well do it with panache. Summoning a broad grin, I wave my arm in a gesture that encompasses the entire street. Shop owners flipping signs over to “OPEN” and unlocking doors. Commuters on their way to another workday behind a desk. Nobody even looks our way.

Some things never change.
“When I was a kid, this all used to be a bazaar. Fruit stands, clothing vendors, booksellers… They sold just about anything that would fit on a cart.”

At his questioning look, I go ahead and elaborate. Might as well. He did give me the back massage and foot spa treatment, after all. “See, things were pretty tight back then for this colony. No one could really afford to set up shop, pay employees and utility bills and what all. So they’d rent a space for the day and wheel their carts out of storage.”

I grin, hard and wide, shaking my head at the memory. Hard times, but good times, too. That’s some fucked up shit right there. “Those poor merchants. My gang and I were absolute terrors. We were fast and we had expensive taste. We always hit the fruit stands the hardest. We knew we could trade what we didn’t eat for just about anything we wanted. I remember getting a pair of shoes for a bunch of seedless concord grapes once.

“The house we’d, uh, appropriated was decent, I suppose. Close to downtown. Protected, y’know? We were real careful to keep our presence in it a secret. Then this demolitions crew showed up one day and ordered us to clear out. They were putting up an office building. Gonna tear our house down.

“I was furious. How could they just do this? It wasn’t like we used up their tax dollars or anything. We didn’t go to school. Didn’t beg on the streets. We did steal. A lot. But the merchants could always just blame it on the soldiers and get Alliance compensation.

“So, when they told me an’ my gang that we were gonna be living in an orphanage… heh. I bet you can imagine what I had to say about that.” I glance over, sharing my wry grin. He looks like he could do with a little irreverent amusement. He’s too effing serious.

“Yeah, like any of us were adoption material.” Or so I’d thought. “But they proved me wrong. Everyone shaped up and shipped out except for me. I guess I was too headstrong, too old to change my ways or something, and I ended up staying.”

As I relate this, our meandering path leads us back toward the site of the former Maxwell Church. I prattle on, impressing the hell out of myself with the light, amicable quality of my voice. Jesus, this hurts. Thinking it is bad enough. Saying it out loud is worse.

“The priest and nun that ran the church were… well, they became, I guess, like parents. Not that I’d know or anything, but…” I shrug to cover up the roiling agony. Across the street, I spot a scout. One of Pinky’s considering the territory we’re in. I shake my head and the girl moves on.

Huh. I hadn’t really expected Trowa and I to be given free passes. But it’s cool. Saves time.

“The Father and Sister provided me with the essentials, sent me to school, talked to me. They never really treated me like I was a little kid, never lectured me on what to do. I’d been taking care of myself for just about as far back as I could remember and they seemed to respect that. They were just… there. And I could see they really cared about me and wanted what was best for me.”

I don’t say anything else until we come to a halt in front of the memorial. I read the plaque for the hundredth time. Trowa mimics me, taking his time absorbing the message. The loss. The waste of it all.

He asks one question, “Were you the only one?”

_The only survivor._

Shock — how had he guessed?
And then relief — thank God I don’t have to say it.

And finally regret. It crashes over me. Trowa is, as ever, watching me. I know he can see it all. I turn toward the ruins and nod. Once.

Unclench my jaw.

Get the hell on with it.

“One day, these rebels burst in. On the run from the Alliance. And of course Father Maxwell and Sister Helen take in the wounded.” Though, it’s not like one elderly priest and young nun could have stopped them. Still. Every time I revisit this moment, it’s all I can do not to tear my own hair out in disgust. In agonized fury and absolute frustration.

“The rebels that could still fight were hell-bent on taking down their next target. Gonna use the church as their launch point to do it. The leader wanted a mobile suit. Just one. That was all they needed to get on with their bullshit and leave us alone. So I went and stole one.”

Oh, God. I can’t do this.

I have to do this.

I cover my mouth with a hand, twisting my own lips as I battle back the sobs and snot. A moment later, I manage a breath without breaking down the middle. My arm falls. The tears do not. I tell Trowa, “I couldn’t figure out any other way to make them leave. But in the end, it didn’t matter. I by the time I’d hidden the truck and circled back, everything was—it was—”

I flick my hands toward the ruins. “Gone.”


“It was my fault. I’m pretty sure the Alliance attacked because I’d stolen the suit. I broke in while wearing a black seminary uniform. Only so many places I could have gotten one of those. One place, actually. Easy as space-slide to send a team to the church to check things out, all they’d have had to do is take a peek in through the windows and see the rebels. Radio for back up and boom. Done deal. Just like that. Boom.”

I glare at the place where Father Maxwell had fallen. The spot where that selfish sonuvabitch rebel leader had bled out. The patch of concrete where Sister Helen had held on long enough to tell me goodbye.

The fury warms me like an embrace from an old friend. Sometimes I miss the war.

“It was a good thing I’d hidden the truck and the mobile suit so well because they were gonna come in handy later.”

My hands fist until I feel the sting of nails digging into my palm. I hate so hard, so much, that I nearly choke on it.


“Of course not. Do what you need to do.”
OK, then. I nudge Trowa away from the ruins and point us in a new direction. I’m pretty sure he’s familiar with our next stop, too.

I walk the safeline. It takes a little longer — it’s a not-so-scenic scenic route, but I’m really not in the mood to deal with Retcher and his buddies right now. Despite the detour, we still arrive before I’m ready. Hell, I’m never ready to face this place. Never gonna be.

The abandoned Alliance base. Wrecked and ravaged. Still burning and forever erupting in my memory.

I can’t count the number of times I’ve tried and flat-out failed to get closer. A shit ton of obstacles always seem to crop up: rage, guilt, shame, pain.

For some damn reason or other, I have this vision: like, if I could just get up the nerve to shoulder past the guard gate and make it back to the officers’ quarters, I’d be met by a ghost or two. Then we could have it out, once and for all. Bury the past. Out of sight, out of mind.

I’ve never had the balls to actually go that far, though. Not since I’d recently returned to my home-sweet-home colony.

It pisses me off to admit it, but I’m afraid. I’m afraid if I set foot in these ruins, knowing what I know now, that I’ll never be able to leave. I’ll be trapped, but unlike the last time when they’d thrown me in a holding cell, there’ll be no way out for me. The dead will rise up and sip from the tainted wellspring of my life until I’m left to roam and wander in aimless fury and regret. A ghost bound to this forsaken colony. As cold as outer space itself.

As badly as I want to wipe this place from my memory and pretend it never happened, I can’t. Shit happened here. Big time. Trowa knows my record from the war, yeah, but what he doesn’t know is that my dependence on violence runs deeper, goes even further back into the past. Violence is all I’m destined for.

I stop walking before the guard gate, as usual. Trowa stops walking, too. In perfect silence.

If I didn’t know he was there and real and human, I would have thought I’d dreamed him up.

I tell him, “I’d been working for Hilde for a while when I heard the salvage contract for this base was coming up. The business was going through a rough patch and we couldn’t really afford it, but—hell, I didn’t even talk to her about it, I just placed a bid. I had to see how... broken and insignificant this place was. I wanted to relish having the right to pick through its bones and take whatever I wanted. I was still furious for what they had done to the church. I still wanted revenge. Which doesn’t really make any sense.”

There’s a long pause before Trowa inquires, “Why doesn’t it?”

I lean back, spreading my arms wide, embracing the destruction. I tilt my chin, cocky and brash, and I brag, “Because I was the one who did this.”

I don’t glance over to see if it looks like he believes me. If he doesn’t now, he will soon enough.

“After Father Maxwell and Sister Helen were killed, I swore to bring down the Alliance on this colony. I swore to do everything in my power to keep them from hurting anyone else. To keep them from making more orphans like me. So I joined up with the rebels who had gone underground.”

I laugh. It’s a dark, twisted sound that spirals up from my blackened heart. “They were real happy
to see me and the mobile suit I was bringing with me. Ten minutes and I was in. It took a while, but I learned how to make and set explosives. Got real good at stealth work. Two, three, four years, I waited and I planned and, little by little, I hoarded the shit I’d need for one last visit to this place.”

Even now, I can hear the sickening thrill of anticipation in my voice.

“I knew my time on this colony would be over once I’d blown the base, so I didn’t really worry about hurting anyone’s feelings. I packed up all the stolen explosives and blasting caps I’d hidden in caches over the years, snuck onto the base, and planted them. It took me a couple of days to get everything in place. By then I was exhausted. And I got caught.”

I decide now’s a good time to gauge Tro’s reaction to all this. I glance his way.

My smirk flattens under the weight of Trowa’s gaze. He isn’t staring at the ruined Alliance base. He’s watching me. Watching me edit out the parts that I can’t even bear to admit to myself.

I wait for him to ask.

He doesn’t. He won’t.

I take a breath. I clear my throat.

“And I escaped. Blew the ever-loving shit out of this hellhole. This was the first deliberate kill I’d ever made. My first act as Shinigami. I walked away and didn’t look back.”

Literally, that is true. But now I know that I’ve looked back every day ever since for the sake of drawing upon my hatred and fury.

“So, this place pops up on the salvage line and I had to have it. I had to make sure there would be no possible way it could ever resurrect itself.” Here, my anger fades. Fizzes into nothing. Just like a busted oxygen tank in space.

I swallow. It hurts. It always hurts. “But I had no idea I’d find—that those private safes in the residences would hold... what they did.”

And right there, I make myself stop. Nothing good will come from offering up the details. Gouging out every ounce of pain won’t make a difference; there’s always gonna be more. An endless supply.

Today, I have the strength to turn my back on this place, so I do.

Trowa hasn’t said more than two dozen words during our little field trip. He’s just watched and listened and followed. Maybe that’s his power. Maybe that’s his power over me.

I scuff along and he silently paces down the middle of the empty street. I suddenly blurt, “What do you see?”

He recalls our conversation in the dark hours of the morning. I can see it in the angle of his brows, the look in his eyes. He stops and turns toward me. I overshoot by a step, startled by the earnest expression on his face. Holy God. Trowa Barton has shit to say and even before he opens his mouth, I know it’s gonna be heavy.

He lifts a hand to brush my long bangs aside and says, “You. I see you.”

Oh, Jesus. I don’t think I wanna know because what if he can see me? What if I can’t hide my sins from him? Or worse, what if he’s wrong — what if he tells me I’m a blameless victim of
circumstance — and I believe him?

It would be so easy to believe that. To fall into the lie that makes everything bearable.

But I’ve never been able to leave a box unopened, a friend untested, or a war unfought, so I demand, “Who the hell do you think I am?”

A strange, sudden gravity pulls us together. He doesn’t resist it and I — God help me — I don’t want to. His hand settles against my neck, his thumb resting over my pulse. “Duo Maxwell, you are someone who laughs, who loves, who feels pain, who makes mistakes, who keeps his promises. You are my friend.”

My eyes close. A shiver ripples through my body at the words. Trowa waits for me to swallow once, twice, and finally locate my voice. “Thanks.”

Trowa shakes his head. I’m not surprised; he’s never been particularly eager to accept gratitude. Well, not that I know of. He assures me, “It’s the truth.”

I gape at him for a long moment, searching his face. Trowa allows the scrutiny, even though he can’t possibly have any idea what I’m looking for. He’d be disappointed at best, horrified at worst, if he knew the question I’m seeking an answer to: Who do you regret killing?

But I can guess the answer: no one. Trowa doesn’t have regrets. Not ones like mine. Somehow, that’s comforting. That he’d been spared this pain. Yeah, I like that.

“You’re right,” I admit, although I very deliberately don’t point out exactly what Trowa had gotten right. I pivot around on my heels and begin walking again. Trowa’s hand slides gently from my skin and is returned to his jacket pocket. I eye that pocket and it fucking amazes me that if I need his touch — for whatever reason — he’ll offer his hand to me again. For now, though, it remains concealed. Like the weapon it is, and yet it’s also a helluvalot more. Trowa doesn’t touch people for the hell of it. Doesn’t like being touched much, either. But I’m one of the few exceptions.

All because I am his friend.

With that realization, a metal spike — invisible but dead-on accurate — rams right into the center of my chest.

Trowa believes I’m his friend.

But friends don’t lead each other on just for the sake of putting off the Devil when payment comes due. Which is exactly what I’ve been doing. I’d let him convince me to put things off a week. And for what? Really, for what? So he could be targeted by skin hunters? So he could risk his life? So he could choke on bite after bite of malnutrition? So he could work his ass off doing hard labor? Exactly how am I worthy of being his friend?

All I’ve done, since the moment he’d arrived, is take. Under the guise of looking out for him, I’ve allowed him to help me forget.

Friends don’t do to each other what I’m doing to him. If I really am his friend, I’d tell him the whole story. I’d show him why this deadline has to happen.

The real question—the only question—is whether or not I’m strong enough to risk it.

I don’t… I don’t think I am.
Eight hours.

I start walking. “What do you want to do today?” I ask, uncomfortably aware that our afternoon is wide open.

For several steps, Trowa doesn’t answer, but I can hear him thinking. Wording and re-wording and re-working whatever it is that he’s frickin’ chewing to death.

“Dude, Trowa. Just spit it out. What do you want?”

“You.”

He says it softly. Doesn’t blurt it out. Doesn’t even sound angry about it. Not like I would. Amazing. “OK.”

He jerks. Looks at me. I manage a sideways glance. I can give him this. I can give him eight hours with someone he thinks he knows. It’s the least I can do.

I point us in the direction of the one-story house. Yup, back to where this all started. It doesn’t look like anyone has been back since the jerks who had taken off with the heater-and-hot-plate deal that I’d scavenged.

I unroll my sleeping bag in the middle of what had been “our” room. I kick off my boots and lie down. He can do whatever he wants about it. I’m just along for the ride.

His sleeping bag unfurls against mine. Our gazes meet. He steps out of his own footwear. Lies down.

He reaches for my hand. He really, really likes to interlock our fingers. I’ve noticed this, believe me. I might touch people more than he does, but I use it to distract them from the fact that I know more about them and their comfort levels than they think they know about me and mine.

I stare up at the cracked ceiling. I think about opening up the bottle of whiskey. Before I can offer, a thumb brushes over mine. I turn my head toward him. He’s lying on his back, watching me. His restless touch is soothing.

“Are your eyes blue or purple?” he wants to know.

“Depends on the light.”

He nods, his gaze moving up toward my hair. I haven’t fucked with it since yesterday morning. “Your hair has gold in it.”

I grin and retaliate, “Yours has fire.” It’s true. There’s this orange-y red glow, like copper, to it. The way the early afternoon light sifts through the dirty window pane brings it out.

His thumb moves back and forth. I slip mine out from under his and ease it on top. For a moment, he lets me pin his down, but then he shifts. Covers mine again. We play this game for a long time. This slow-motion thumb war with no victor. I don’t check my watch. So long as it’s not dark outside, I don’t need to.

The feel of our skin sliding together is relaxing. Hypnotizing. I close my eyes as the light crawls across the floor. My lips quirk as I think of all the questions Trowa could ask me that I’d probably answer honestly right now with no hesitation or side-stepping.
I’ve always been able to think on my feet. But I’d give it a rest for him. Right here. Right now.

When Trowa’s hand stops moving, I open my eyes. His are shut, his lips slightly parted. Sleeping.

Does all that hair ever tickle him awake?

If given the choice, does he prefer coffee or tea?

What is his favorite color?

Does he miss flying?

What did he fight for during the war?

Does he have anyone waiting for him?

When at home, does he go around in socks, slippers, or bare feet?

Is he a dog person or a cat person?

His favorite food? Book? Poet? Musician?

What gives him goose bumps?

What gets his rocks off: race car, motorcycle, or old fashioned bicycle?

Sunny days or rain?

How will he remember me when I’m gone?

Do I even want him to?

Chapter End Notes

“There’s a mark to hit at a hundred meters with a fucking C-ration” is a nod to Duo’s willingness to use whatever is at hand to get the job done. I’m thinking of the memorable scene where he chucks his own space helmet at a dude to knock him out. It’s pretty epic.

Duo’s gang (after Solo’s death), the fate of their hideout, the adoption of the kids in his gang, Duo’s time at Maxwell Church, the arrival of the injured and desperate rebels at the church, and the Alliance’s attack are all from Episode Zero. It’s also suggested in Episode Zero that shop owners could get reimbursed from the Alliance for damage caused by soldiers.

My own ideas include: the presence of an Alliance base on Duo’s home colony, Duo’s decision to destroy a particular Alliance target, and Duo joining up with rebels after the church was destroyed.

Also, the part at the beginning of the chapter where Duo implies that Father Maxwell used to say something about how people could begin anew despite their past sins (or the
stains on their soul) is not from Episode Zero, but I think it’s something that Father Maxwell would have believed.

The line "The point is that Trowa had come for me. Not with the intention of killing me, but of freeing me." is a nod to the series when Duo is first captured by Oz and Trowa, learning of this, assumes Heero will rescue Duo because Heero's close to his position, but Heero actually breaks into the detention area to kill Duo, changing his mind at (apparently) the last second and rescuing Duo (who is all battered and whatnot) instead.

As a side note: I imagine that a military base would have to be made of stronger stuff than the standard colony structures, so the materials used in its construction are not recyclable on Duo’s home colony. That’s why a salvage contract had come up for the base: the colony administrators had been looking for someone to haul their “garbage” away. (I also imagine there are some serious smelting and recycle plants on resource satellites or mining operations on asteroids. So, someone, somewhere in outer space, could probably reuse the remnants of the Alliance base.)
Cold Water, Warm Arms

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: More bad language, underage drinking


Music recs: "Smokestacks" by LAYLA & “Fire Sign” by David Berkeley

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... DUO ...

Trowa Barton, man of mystery. Despite forcing his way into my life, fucking with my plans, and sticking to me like a shadow for a solid week, I still know next to nothing about him.

Does he regret bumping into me on the street?

Are there any foods he hates more than peanut butter?

I don’t know how many questions I think up but don’t ask. Will never ask.

Oh, Jesus.

A noise — not a whimper or a whine, Duo Maxwell does not whimper or whine — but some small noise escapes me. Let’s call it a hum. A speculative hum. It cuts through the silence and I stiffen, brace myself for the inevitable fluttering of his lashes. I hadn’t wanted to wake him and a flash of irritation washes over me. Duo Maxwell, the master of stealth, can’t even share a room with a guy without waking him up. Of all the totally ridiculous shit to fuck up and get my shorts in a twist over —

Trowa shifts closer, eyes still closed. He scoops me into his arms, gently laying me across his chest, nestling my head against his shoulder, and finding the nape of my neck with his fingers.

I let him. I blame it all on shock as I blink, wide-eyed, and let him.

“I’m here, Duo,” he whispers drowsily, working the tightly corded muscles. “It’s just a dream. Let go.” I don’t sense true wakefulness in either his slurred words or gentle touch. Jesus. He’s half asleep, comforting me on autopilot. “It’s just another nightmare. You’re safe. Go to sleep...”

Slowly, I let myself relax against him. I let him work his magic. Hell, there’s no force in the universe that can stop my muscles from turning into some kind of goo — warm butter, soft caramel, baby snot, you name it — under his hands. Add in his soothing baritone and I’m done for. This killer has been decommissioned.

Only my aching heart and stinging pride manage to keep me from falling asleep for real.

It takes a little concentration, but I eventually get my breaths to even and shallow out. Trowa is
maybe more alert than I’d thought: he waits, gently rubbing first one shoulder then the other. The
guy has freakin’ light years of patience. His hands continue moving long after I would have thought
he’d give up. Eventually, the motions slow and he begins to drift back into genuine slumber. Mere
moments later, his shallow, even breaths join mine.

Oh, God. What have I done?

This is a nightmare. Maybe not the kind Trowa’d thought I’d been having, but yeah. I’m fucked.

It’s gonna hurt a million times worse now when I ask him to send me off with a smile. Now that I’ve
been able to lie here all warm and safe. God, it’s been so long since I’ve felt this content. It’s not
fair that this is happening now.

Hah. As if life has ever been fair.

I turn my thoughts away from this whole, sorry, unbearable situation and replay his words, wonder
where he’d learned just the right thing to say to put my mind at ease when—

It hits me: “I’m here, Duo.”

Oh my God. It’s me. Here. On this fucking colony. This is where he’d learned how to work his
magic. I’m the one he’s been practicing on. It’s my name he says when he’s God damn half asleep.
And just why is that? Because—

“Another nightmare…”

Another. Nightmare.

Jesus Christ.

I’d thought it was just luck that the nightmares had stopped so suddenly, but it hadn’t been luck.
It had been Trowa. And last night had been the one time he hadn’t been able to stop one from
happening until it was too late.

Hell, if he had managed to soothe away that nightmare, I’d bet he wouldn’t have said a single word
about it in the morning. Like all the other mornings when I’d woken lazily and he’d said nothing
about his night, said not a thing about giving up his own rest for the sake of easing me around my
terror.

So Trowa had known about the nightmares even before last night. He’d stayed and he hadn’t
asked. Just like he’d promised.

Where does he get off acting like my damn nanny? Why hadn’t he tried to lecture me like
Heero, or try and get me to talk about it like Howard? Why had he just... stayed?

But I think I know. Because Trowa and I are alike in a lot of ways and this here is one of them.
He’d stayed for the same reason I would have if the situation had been reversed.

Trowa had stayed because he is my friend. Because, no matter what, you don’t leave one of your
own behind.

I have to fight to keep my body limp as my eyes start to burn.

I study the exposed and occasionally blurring lines of Trowa’s face while he sleeps. When my
breath hitches, his arms tighten around me and I can’t deny it anymore: Trowa genuinely seems to
give a damn. I can’t blame the masher or adrenaline or some other bullshit. We’re past that now.
But if I were to tell him the truth, that would change faster than an egg exploding in outer space.

So where does that leave us?

…us. Hah. I’m such a fucking comedian. As if there’s ever gonna be an “us.” As if I’ll ever get to
have that. Not me. Not ever.

I’d chosen this path of my own free will years ago. Now it’s time to be a man and walk it.

I bite my lip. My body tenses again. Trowa makes a sound in the back of his throat: something
that’s not quite a word, but is obviously meant to soothe.

Oh, Jesus. For the first time since Trowa had offered to do whatever I asked in exchange for putting
my plans off for one week, I’m not sure what I’m going to demand of him.

I’m just… not certain of anything anymore.

My hands curl into fists. The blood buzzes in my veins. I try to focus on breathing, but every
inhalation brings Trowa’s scent with it. Every moment, more of his body heat seeps into me.

I suddenly think of those cheerful, flat, round, yellow flowers on Earth — dandelions. Cute little
things. They look so sturdy. Hardy and happy. And they’re everywhere, right? Because I guess
they’re some kind of weed. No one’s been able to eradicate them; I’ve got to admire the tenacity of
their survival. Survival that’s possible thanks to the fact that, eventually, each and every one of those
bright, sunny flowers turns into a ghostly sphere of seeds. Hundreds of seeds drifting on the breeze
like ghosts.

That is exactly what I am right now: one breath away from scattering into the ether, destination
unknown.

Trowa shifts in his sleep and I seize my chance, lifting myself off of his chest and rolling to my feet.
Padding out of the room. Down the hall. My vision blurs, but that’s all right. I know the layout of
this old shack by heart.

I quietly close the bathroom door behind me. Brace myself on the sink. Stare into the darkness of
the drain. Look up into the cracked and grime-speckled mirror. Glance away.

There are no answers here.

Are there answers with Trowa?

My skin itches. Burns.

I can’t—I can’t be feeling this. Whatever this is. I can’t. I can’t have him.

The last thing I want is to disappoint him, but of course I will. This was always the way things were
gonna go.

I need my smile back. If I can just scrape together a little more courage, I can do this. I can ask him
to let me go. He’ll do it. He’ll have to. He’d promised me, damn it. He owes me. He—

What a crock of shit.

The silence crushes my chest until I remember to breathe, but dragging in a lungful of air doesn’t do
a damn thing for the ache beneath my breastbone. With every inhale, the oxygen only fuels the
agony. With each exhale, the flames spread. I squeeze my eyes shut, wishing I could close my ears to the sound of my own raspy breaths.

Fuck this.

With a sharp twist, the bathing tap opens and the colony’s pressurized water system forces icy jets through the rusted shower head. It’s surprisingly easy to connect the water lines if you know your way around maintenance tunnels. And because all the water ends up back in the recycler anyway, no one pays too much attention to where it comes out. Hot water, though, is another story. One that would definitely get noticed. Electricity is strictly regulated, so space-chilled water is the best I can do.

Is it any wonder my first memory of a proper bath is from when I’d been about eight years old?

I dump my clothes on the floor and dive in.

Shit, that stings!

I can barely breathe, but I don’t move. Finally, the pain on the outside of my skin overwhelms what I feel on the inside. I wait for the numbness. If I just stand here long enough, it’ll happen. I need it to happen. I need to be numb.

The white noise of the water droplets slamming into the metal basin fills my head, pushing out everything else. Surrounding me and slowly narrowing my existence to meaningless sound and freezing water. I raise my arms and brace myself under the punishing spray, lowering my head and letting the granules of water sting my back.

It fucking hurts to say goodbye.

I’m not surprised that a goodbye of some kind was gonna happen. I’d accepted it the moment I’d bumped into Trowa on the street. This was always gonna happen. I’d never fooled myself into thinking otherwise.

Death’s not so bad.

But it is. Now it is.

The water is too cold and yet not cold enough. My muscles begin to shake but I stick it out, waiting for that damned nothingness to block out the rest of the universe — past, present, and future.

Future. Hah. What a joke. What a huge damn joke my life is. Death is getting a good laugh outta this, that’s for damn sure.

Heero had been right. There’s no one who can absolve me.

Howard had been right. Even from behind those stupid shades, I’d seen his pity. I’m pathetic.

God damn you, Trowa. I could’ve ended this quick and easy if you hadn’t shown up.

One more feast of peanut butter sandwiches before taking my bottle of whiskey to an unused docking port, drinking until I couldn’t feel my own skin, and then popping open the hatch. Bam! One second of zooming unprotected through the cold vacuum of space and it’d have been all over.

I’d had it all planned until Trowa fucking Barton had just about stepped on me.

When had “my terms” turned into something that wasn’t wholly mine anymore? How had he gotten
under my skin? How can he just be here, watching and waiting and accepting? Hands that don’t try to dissect me. Eyes that don’t judge me. Why is this what breaks me?

Howard’s annoying insistence that I talk about it had been safer. Heero’s clinical diagnosis had been kinder. I get that now.

Now that all I have left is fear.

I don’t know how to live with what I’ve done.

But I…

I think I…

I want to try.

“Fuck!”

The voice isn’t mine, but that doesn’t bother me. Not much can at this point.

I’m vaguely aware of the water being shut off, of something soft and warm covering my back and burning my skin. It chafes and I flinch. I want numbness not sensation, but it doesn’t matter what I want — when has it ever? Resistance is a foreign concept as I’m hauled out of the shower stall and lifted up to stare into a pair of concerned, green eyes.

Trowa. He looks so mad.

That hadn’t been my intention. Not this time.

But then I blink, noticing the way his shoulders heave and his bare chest swells with each breath. As if he’d been running or fighting for his life. Or freaking out. He beckons in a gentle voice, “Come with me, Duo. Let’s get warm.”

“Warm?” I try to echo, but my chattering teeth get in the way and I stutter nonsense. My bare feet tangle in my discarded clothes. I trip. Trowa’s hands don’t let me fall. My body shivers so hard, I think I almost dislocate my joints. Jesus, it’s so fucking cold. I remind myself that space is colder than this, but my brain implodes softly, imagination failing in silence as profound as the universe itself.

Trowa herds me down the hall and into the bedroom. “Sit with me. Here. That’s right. Good. Let’s have a drink.”

I think I frown, but I can’t feel my own face well enough to be sure. “A dr-dr-drink?”

Trowa keeps an arm around my shoulders. He presses his body against mine and the heat just about melts the meat off my bones. I shrink away, but he gives me zero wiggle room. He yanks my backpack over and pulls out the plastic fifth of whiskey. Giving it a good shake, he loosens the wrapping of clothes from around it, scattering my undershirts and a pair of shorts on the surface of the sleeping bag.

Arms still around me, he grinds open the cap behind my back, bringing the bottle around and tilting the mouth to his lips. I watch him take a sip. Swallow.

“See? Just like that.”

He tilts the bottle up for me and the liquor splashes onto and under my tongue. I shudder, choke,
cough. Trowa pours a second time. My quaking body allows me to gulp the second mouthful down
easier. It feels like flames in my mouth, my throat, my belly.

I start to remember what it means to be warm.

Oh, God. I’m so cold.

Trowa’s hands guide his shirt over me, using it as a towel, rubbing briskly, and I just give the hell
in. I press my face against his bare shoulder and let him do whatever. A half-dead, starving hull rat
could’ve offered more of a fight.

In that mellow, quiet voice that I’m always gonna associate with sleeping lions and chess pieces,
Trowa asks permission, “Can I wrap your hair?”

My fingers curl against Trowa’s skin. I try to speak. It doesn’t happen. My throat is still
smoldering. I nod.

He rolls up my dripping braid in the damp, black turtleneck and maneuvers me into a pair of boxers,
jeans, and a sweater. He does all of this one-handed. Like he’s worried I’ll collapse into the chill of
my own soul if I lose the touch of another warm body.

He might just be right. My control has never been this thin before. It scares me.

“Here, Duo. Sit with me like this.” He steers me until I lean my aching body against his chest, my
shoulder pressed against his. He wraps his legs around me and reaches for his sleeping bag. Unzips
it and covers both of us. Guides my arms around his torso so that I’m hugging him. Holy hell is his
skin hot.

Hands release my braid from the cloth turban. Fingers gently pick apart the weave.

“I’m sorry,” he says and I sigh. He doesn’t get it. There’s nothing for him to be sorry for. I’d let
him touch my hair no matter what.

“Duo? Can you talk to me?”

He sounds scared, too. Of me? For me? Am I scaring him? Hell, I probably am. “It’s OK,” I
grind out. A shiver interrupts me before I can continue.

“It’s not. I know this is yours. But it’s keeping you from getting warm.”

With my forehead pressed to his collarbone, I rock my head back and forth. “It’s you. So it’s OK.”

His hands pause at the base of my skull. I feel the shuddering breath he draws. Yeah, he knows.
He knows I’m not holding on just because he wants me to.

His Adam’s apple bobs. He clears his throat. “Oh.” He just about chokes on the sound.

I laugh, but it turns into muscle spasms. His hands rub over my arms and back until I downgrade to
shivers. One arm curves around my shoulders and my nose twitches when the lip of the bottle
hovers within sipping distance. “Here, have some more of this.”

I dunno if I’m ready to unbury my face yet, though. The minute I do, I’m gonna wish I’d just
freakin’ died of hypothermia in the damn shower.

“It’ll help,” he coaxes.
It’s still not enough to make me face the fallout from my confession.

Trowa tries one more time, “Please?”

Damn it. I let out a blustery breath and try to uncurl my cramped fingers from the fists that I’m pressing against his back, but my hands start shaking. God damn it. In the end, I just angle my mouth accommodatingly and Trowa cradles the back of my head. Tips the whiskey up to my lips.

One sip. It sears my throat and belly almost as bad as those first couple of swallows, but the next round of shivers isn’t as bad, so I take a second sip. Then another. And another.

In between each tiny increment, my gaze flickers up to Trowa’s. He keeps up a steady monologue in a voice that’s too soothing to be unpracticed. “There. That’s it. Just bit more…”

I watch. I listen. I feel. And, slowly, my body stops resisting and starts soaking up the warmth from the liquor and Trowa. My muddled thoughts roll over and over in my mind for several long moments before I ask tiredly, “How the hell do you know what to do?”

Trowa offers me a small smile, one that’s neither sad nor condescending. He actually looks kind of relieved that I’m cussing at him again. “You remember when I lost my memory?”

I do. I remember Cathy wrapping her arms around his shoulders and speaking softly, endlessly, as I’d stuck my hands in my pockets and walked away. “Oh,” I say. It’s my turn for an awkward conversation ender, it seems.

“Yeah.” Trowa lifts the fifth in silent question.

I roll my shoulders, testing my body. I’m loose. The whiskey has finally released the death grip of the soul-shattering chill. In answer to the offer of more liquor, I shake my head. I’m good for now. I don’t wanna be drunk. I just wanna… be.

Trowa sets the bottle down and settles both of his arms around my shoulders, letting out a long breath and leaning into me. It’s sobering to realize I’m holding him up. I don’t feel strong enough, but somehow that’s what I do.

Some minutes later, I snap out of my doze when he shifts. Finds the small comb in my bag. Begins working the snarls out slowly and with care, starting from the ends and moving up. He spreads the strands out over the surface of the open Allie bag still surrounding us. Tucks his arms back inside and the air suddenly feels steaming inside our cocoon.

“I’m so fucked up, Tro,” I warn him.

Trowa rubs his hands up and down my back in encouragement.

On a sigh, I confess, “I don’t have a plan for this. Living. The nightmares are…” I don’t know how to say what I mean. Hell, I don’t know what I mean.

I insist, “You don’t have to stay.” But I don’t know how I’ll get through this if he leaves.

He presses his cheek against my wet hair, moving slowly and relaxing when I don’t head-butt him away. “I’m staying. I know a little about nightmares, Duo. I know how hard it is to endure them alone.”

I can’t think of a response to that. Moments blur into minutes before I venture, “Trowa?”
“Hm?”

I have to clear my throat twice and even then my voice is little more than a squeaky whisper, “Did you leave the circus to find me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I needed to.”

I can feel my mouth curving just at the corners. Drawing in a deep, Trowa-scented breath, the last of my tension bleeds away. It shouldn’t be a big deal, but it is: Trowa had come here because he’d needed to find me, not because I’d needed him. There is no pity in this room with us. I’m not completely sure what is lurking in the corners, but I sure as hell know what isn’t.

“So how come you waited until the convenience store to talk to me?” I could probably figure this out for myself, but my brain hurts and the whiskey has relaxed me enough to let someone else do the heavy lifting.

“Because I didn’t know how else to approach you without putting you on the defensive.”

“Oh. So you already knew.”

“I knew about the nightmares.”

“Who?”

“Howard. And Heero.”

That gets my attention, but I still don’t lift my head up. “Shit. How many people did you bug about me?”

If my breath tickles him, Trowa’s doing a super job of hiding it. He replies, “Everyone.”

I scowl. “Everyone?”

He nods. “Quatre, Wufei, Hilde, Howard, and Heero.”


“I can’t explain it logically. I just had to.”

My palms press against his scars. These imperfections — this proof of his strength and persistence and will to survive — inspire enough courage in me that I can lean back. We stare at each other.

Trowa reluctantly asks, “Are you sorry I found you?”

If he’d asked me that yesterday, hell, if he’d asked me that an hour ago, I don’t know what my answer would have been. Now, though, my voice is sure when I tell him, “No. I just, um, never expected…”

“Neither did I.”

I grin. “Welcome to my life.”
The corner of Trowa’s mouth twitches. “I don’t know about you, but I’m scared.”

“You? Scared?”

“OK — terrified.”

I snort. “Yeah, you look it.” Still grinning, I nod toward my half-emptied backpack and the remains of the food therein. “Hungry?” We have just enough bread for one and a half sandwiches.

“Sure.”

His lack of enthusiasm is hilarious. And yet it isn’t. It’s humbling: Trowa Barton would eat peanut butter sandwiches every day indefinitely if that was all I wanted.

Luckily for him, it’s not. Not anymore.

He hands me a whole sandwich and folds over the end of the loaf, stuffing his peanut butter bread taco between his lips.

“You can do the resigned sigh thing if you want to,” I tease.

His lips quirk. “I’m fine.”

“OK, then slow down. Savor it. It’s gonna be your last peanut butter sandwich for a long time.”

He pauses. Scans my expression and reads the smile that feels almost soft on my own face.

He grins. “That is good news.”

“I don’t wanna make this any harder than it’s gonna be.” My jaw clenches. “And it’s gonna be real hard.”

“I’m not afraid of a little hard work.”

No, I don’t suppose he is. Normally, I wouldn’t be, either, but this shit is different.

My stomach growls. Impatient for the sandwich it can probably smell. I huff out a laugh and Trowa chuckles in near-silence, more relieved than amused. Relieved that I’m not planning on dying on him anymore, maybe. “Turn around and eat your sandwich. We need to deal with your hair.”

I wiggle around in the bracket of Trowa’s long legs. Damn. We’re sitting here like lovers. I bite my lip as Trowa’s hands begin sifting though my unbound hair, speeding up the drying process. I lift the stale sandwich to my mouth and finally notice what I’m wearing.

“Is this your sweater?” I demand, pinching the folds of knitted material between my fingers.

“Yeah.”

Holy shit. This is happening: I’m wearing his clothes, practically sitting in his lap, letting him handle my damn hair. A flare of belated panic makes my mouth go dry. “It’s nice.”

“Thank you.” I barely feel it as Trowa carefully combs his fingers through my hair and I relax. So what if we are getting closer — really closer. There’s no one else I would trust to hold me like this. I don’t know when or how it had happened, but I need him. I need him like I need my next meal, my next breath, my next heartbeat.
I look down at the sleeping bag, at his jean-clad legs, at his sweater, at the food. I have to force the words out through a throat that is suddenly too tense, but the words themselves are easy to say, “Thank you, Trowa.”

His fingertips skim the tops of my ears. “It’s my pleasure.”

I think it is, too. This guy, what a weirdo. I can practically hear him smile when my shoulders twitch on a cough of laughter. I eat my sandwich.

“I’m probably going to have nightmares tonight,” I warn him.

“OK,” he says.

Is there a word that goes beyond the mere concept of “humbling”? There ought to be, because I’m feeling it real hard right now. “And… there’s more. Shit I didn’t tell you today.”

“I know.”

Of course he does. My half-assed tour of truth today wouldn’t be enough to fuck me up this bad. He knows I’m stronger than that. Jesus. Is Trowa ever going to stop giving me gifts like this? These little presents of inference that show his faith in me? God, he’s killing me.

“You won’t like it.” Again, I’m compelled to warn him. “You should do yourself a favor and tell me you don’t wanna know.”

He doesn’t. After a long moment, he murmurs, “Tell me. If you need to.”


“Will you show me how to braid your hair?”

The question is so softly breathed that I could have ignored it. I don’t. I won’t. I won’t ignore anything Trowa asks of me from now on. I scrub my face with my hands, square my shoulders, and sit up straight. “Sure, Tro. Sure.”

So, this is the chapter that you've probably been WAITING for. I hope it satisfied!
There are a dozen patrons here this evening, which is probably why it’s taking the single bartender so long to manage our dinners.

Duo and I claim one of the three billiard tables again. My camp roll is wedged onto a seat beside Duo’s, saving our spots at the bar. There doesn’t appear to be any significant difference between the sight now and five days ago, but there is.

Everything is different. Changed. Duo’s aimless anger has waned. His endless efforts to push me away, spent for the time being. I’ve won the right to stand inside his walls. Finally. I don’t know what I had or hadn’t done, or if our friendship had factored into his decision to live at all. I’m still in shock.

I watch one billiard ball after another roll across the worn-down and stained felt. Each colored blur disappears into dark pockets. I have to stop myself from wondering what I’ll find in Duo’s darkness. Or if he’ll let me look at all.

“Yo, fook,” he calls softly, pulling my attention away from the table. “You knocking hard, or hardly knocking?”

Knocking. It means “thinking,” I’m reasonably sure. Or “understanding,” possibly. I shrug. I don’t know how to answer that in a public place. Or without it sounding like I want or don’t want Duo to tell me the rest of his story. I can’t afford to have an opinion on it one way or the other. I’m here for Duo. The rest doesn’t matter.

“Why?” I rally. “You jacking a smack and flap?” I’m not completely sure of what I’d just said, but it seems appropriate.

Duo’s reaction confirms it: his lips twitch with genuine amusement as he contemplates his next shot. “I underestimated you, y’know. You pick shit up real fast.”

I’m not offended; he and I had never worked together long enough to learn that about each other. Instead of irritation, I feel a blossoming warmth inside my stained, blue turtleneck. The blood hadn’t come out in the first wash. I have some hope for the second. In the meantime, I’m wearing it.
“What’s it look like wrong-side out?” Duo had suggested and I’d checked, impressed by his pragmatism.

“A little better,” I’d noted. Regardless, the duffel and sleeping bag straps would help conceal the brownish splotches in the light of late afternoon. I had taken a moment to saw the care instructions tag off and, once I’d pulled the shirt on over my head, we had left the house in search of dinner.

A meal without peanuts or stale bread. Duo had been serious about starting over. The thrill I feel this time is definitely more like anticipation than unease. Slowly but surely, I’m learning the difference.

Returning to the conversation, I tease, “You couldn’t pay me enough to pick shit up.”

He cracks a smile. “Lookit you! A man of high standards.”

“I’m trying.”

“How’s that working for you?”

“I’m not sure. Are you impressed yet?”

He gives the cue ball a firm tap. “If you have to ask,” he muses as the white ball slowly crosses the felt, “then I must be keeping the mystery alive.”

“Alive” being my main priority, I retort, “A little mystery is fine. It makes me work harder.” This I say as the cue ball nudges Duo’s intended target. It’s more of a kiss than a connection and not quite enough force to convince the number four ball to cross the final centimeter to the hole.

Duo could have made that shot, but he hadn’t. I have to assume that the error had been deliberate. He could have missed the target entirely. Or he could have sent both the cue and number four balls tumbling. Instead, this. His method of forfeiture is a message in and of itself.

He’d said he didn’t want to make things more difficult than they have to be. Here’s a small but encouraging gesture that he’s trying.

I take my turn. I notice the way his gaze follows me as I move around the table, line up my first shot, and execute it. There’s a tilt to his head and a satisfied shine in his eyes that somehow looks more and more like pride with every ball I sink.

Again, I lean over the faded green felt and take careful aim. This will be my fifth shot. I know I could make it, but... I hesitate. I’m honestly not really all that interested in completing it. I suddenly decide that, despite the rules of pool, it’s Duo’s turn again.

I miss my target. The cue ball smacks against one of Duo’s, lining it up perfectly in an ideal angle. Looking up, I find Duo glaring at me with exasperated amusement. He’s not angry that I’d “helped” him.

I step back and wait to see if he’ll accept it.

He chalks his cue stick and strides over. Wary of his reaction, I make room.

He rolls his eyes. “You could have just asked.”

“I just did.”
“With words, hot shot.”

Duo turns his back on me before I can reply, jabbing the cue stick smartly against the cue ball, which bounces once, striking the target I’d set up for him, which in turn bounces once, tumbling right into the pocket in silence.

“Nothing but net” as they say in basketball, which I know he plays. Heero had mentioned it; Duo had taught him the rules during the war. Some school exercise activity of two-on-two basketball when they’d been undercover as students.

“You get that or should I say it again?” Duo checks, smirking.

I smirk back. “Knocked it.”

He laughs softly and I smile. Yeah, I understand: if I set it up, he’ll follow through with style.

Duo sinks his next shot easily, but then misses the one after that, nudging one of my targets in line with the corner pocket. “Your turn.”

The sensation of my blood zooming through my pulse points almost feels like a high on zipline. Grinning, I take the shot, shooting hard enough to knock my target into the pocket and rebound the cue ball so that it strikes an unfortunate cluster holding two of mine and two of his. They separate nicely, but with my next shot, I intentionally ricochet the cue ball off of the side of the table and strike one of Duo’s targets, setting up his next move for him.

“Don’t try to show me up, man,” he cautions as he follows through. “Not gonna happen.”

He’s right. It’s not going to happen because I’m not trying to outshine him at all. But I say, “Well, if you’re not even going to try…”

“You asked for it, pal.”

Indeed I had. I am. I wait. He shoots. The cue ball spins rapidly as it travels in a slow curl. As soon as it touches the number nine ball, the ball in question zooms an impressive distance toward the side pocket. It’s an obscenely clear shot. It would be an insult to Duo if I miss it, so I don’t. But I keep up my end of our billiard dialog by using my next chance to his advantage.

It takes a lot longer to clear the table this way, but neither one of us says a thing. There are simply some things that friends don’t talk about: playing in order to prolong a game of pool, rather than playing to win it, is one of them.

Friends.

The first night we’d spent in the attic of that two-story house, I’d foolishly thought Duo and I had grown closer. I’d had no idea how close we could be. No conception of what it would be like to be as close as we are now. This closeness… it’s addictive. Worse than zipline could ever be.

Duo wins the game, but neither one of us really seems to notice. I reach into my pocket for another cred to feed into the table when our dinners arrive. Duo retires our cues, his fingers brushing mine as I step back. My skin simmers as we settle in our seats and turn our attention to two glasses of flat, slightly-warm refiltered water and two Saturday night specials.

We eat in silence partly because the food is so much better than those damn sandwiches and partly because Duo clearly has something on his mind. I leave him to it. I no longer wonder if he will share his thoughts with me. I trust he’ll tell me when he’s ready.
Whatever it is, it doesn’t come out here, but that’s fine. I’ve waited this long. I can wait longer.

After we each use the restroom, Duo and I shrug our rolled up sleeping bags over our shoulders and collect our belongings. Duo offers a friendly wave to the bartender, who has apparently decided that our floor show with the billiard table is worth a proper farewell. I hold the door open. Duo precedes me onto the sidewalk. It’s nearly dark.

I’m moderately surprised when I realize where we’ll be spending the night, but I don’t say anything. We move silently through the decrepit house, up the stairs, and pause at the attic trapdoor. The residence is empty except for us and the cockroaches.

We make ourselves at home.

The sound of rustling has me tensing in the dark. The only other thing I’d glimpsed in Duo’s backpack this afternoon had been a leather-bound book. The bread and the peanut butter are long gone. Or, they should be.

“Duo? What are you doing?”

“Hah, yeah, I’d ask, ‘what does it look like I’m doing,’ but we don’t have any light to see by yet. That might make this easier, actually.”

A strange blend of curiosity and the need to brace myself for the unexpected makes me venture, “Make what easier?”

The sound of a plastic cap unscrewing answers my question.

“Oh, you’re buying this round, too?”

Duo snorts. “You betcha.”

“You’re too good to me.”

“Got a lot to make up for.”

“No. You don’t.”

“Yeah, I do.”

I’m not going to argue with him, but I have no intention of helping him put a dent in that liquor, either. I kick off my shoes and dig out the deflated bottle of sanitize gel.

Duo sighs. “Look, this is kinda for both of us.”

“How does that work?”

Interestingly, he doesn’t clam up when I push back. He replies, “I, um. Today, I was thinking that I know you, but I don’t know much about you. So, this is ‘truth or drink.’ Whadaya say?”

“I told you I wouldn’t ask.”

“Yeah, but that’s the beauty of it. If I don’t wanna answer — or if I can’t answer — then I gotta drink.” I imagine him shrugging.

“So you’re planning on drinking yourself stupid,” I persist, running down his evasions and excuses.
With chuckle, Duo sets the bottle down, wedging it between the edges of our sleeping bags so that it’s within reach of both of us. “Well, Tro, that kinda depends on how interested I am in your private biz, and how badly you don’t want me to know about it. But, ballpark figure? You’re probably half right.”

I can’t find one ounce of hesitation in me. If Duo really is curious about me…? I swallow hard. Anticipating again. I hadn’t realized how much I want him to be interested in learning about me. But I know better than to give in so quickly. Where would the fun be in that?

I challenge, “Just what makes you think I’ll go along with this?”

“Why not? Seeing as how we’re off tomorrow, I figured we could hang out and, you know…”

“Get schnockered?”

Duo’s laughter is a combination of snorts and chuckles. Nerves and humor. “Hell yeah, man. 'Schnockered.'”

I feel my lips twitch; I can hear the satisfied smirk in his voice. But I don’t agree yet. I wait, wondering if Duo will volunteer anything else by way of persuasion.

“Look. Questions are one-for-one. If things get too raw, we back off.”

“Too raw?”

“Yeah. Um, let’s say if one us chooses to drink instead of answer three questions in a row, we back off and stick to fluffy shit.”

I snort. “For instance?”

“What’s your favorite color?”

I blink. “I don’t have one.”

“Dude, if you can’t even answer that, you are in serious trouble.”

He’s right. “Maybe I’m planning on finishing this bottle by myself.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. You’re not the only stubborn asshole under this sorry roof.”


“Yellow.”

I cough. “Yellow.”

“Yeah. Like a dandelion. I’d never seen one before I went to Earth.”

“You realize that dandelions are—”

“Persistent little shits that refuse to be eradicated by anal retentive, obsessive compulsive, narrow-minded, controlling gardeners who only have respect for the lifeforms that they deem worthy?”

My silence answers for me.

“Yeah, Tro. I know they’re weeds. So am I. Kinda.”
I’m stunned. Duo hasn’t offered this much of himself in the whole time I’ve been here. Even our walk this morning had been more like a lesson on colony history than a glimpse into his mind. But with one “fluffy shit” question, I’ve learned more about him — about the way he sees the world and his place in it — than I’d had any right to expect.

I draw a breath. “I like the way the moon looks from Earth during the daytime. When it’s high in the sky. You don’t normally notice how blue it is until the moon’s staring at you on a clear day. People don’t appreciate how small they are or how huge the sky is or think about all the things that can’t be seen beyond the blue.”

There’s a long bout of silence. When Duo hums, I can picture him with his eyes closed, imagining the scene I’d painted. “See, I knew you’d rock this. Your turn. Chuck one out there, man.”

“What’s the story behind your name?”

Silence. Shocked silence. Obviously he’d been expecting something far different for my opening volley. Hadn’t any of the other pilots ever expressed curiosity in Duo’s unusual first name? It seems an obvious place to start an interrogation.

Following that brief hesitation, Duo tells me. I discover I’d been right about him never leaving a friend behind. It’s right there in his given — his chosen — name. His closest friend, his first “brother-in-arms” had been named “Solo,” so of course the little, orphaned boy living on the streets had called himself “Duo.” I’m so unsurprised that I actually feel a little prideful of my ability to read him. I can’t remember the last time I’d been this pleased with myself. Maybe I’d never been this pleased with myself.

“Your name?” Duo prompts, pushing past his own pain, and I squash my completely inappropriate sense of victory.

I tell him about the spoiled, cocky son of Dekim Barton who’d crowded me every chance he’d gotten, pushing and imposing. “I never bothered to hide the fact that he didn’t impress me. I suppose that encouraged him.”

“Yup, that’ll do it.”

“Anyway, he was shot and killed by one of the assistant engineers when he insisted on going through with Operation Meteor. I volunteered to take his place. I didn’t plan to take his name, but I’d never had one of my own. I needed something for people to call me besides ‘Kid’ or ‘No-name.’”

Again, Duo is very quiet. “You ever hear anyone call him ‘Tro’?”

I think about it, sifting through the whir of power tools and the sputter of sparks. “No.”

“Tro,” Duo repeats with confidence. “That’s all yours, man.”

I feel myself smile in the darkness. I cross my arms over my chest to hold in the sudden warmth. I keep holding on when a chill steals over me: I’d congratulated myself on inferring the reason for Duo’s name; he’d reacted by offering me something unique and special. I suppose one doesn’t have to be standing under a wide, clear sky to feel small all of a sudden.

The simulated moon must be rising because Duo checks, “Cold?”

I still can’t see him, but I hear him shift and feel the bottle press against my arm.
“Y’know, I didn’t say you couldn’t have a drink just for the hell of it.”

Grateful for the reminder, I take the bottle, having to shift my grip when I encounter his fingers. I indulge in a swallow. And a grimace for good measure. It doesn’t taste any better than it had this afternoon.

“Here.” I hold the whiskey out to him and he takes it without fumbling like I had. As I listen to the sounds of him taking a drink, I check, amused, “It’s only fair?”

“Eh. I actually paid for it, y’know? Might as well enjoy it.”

“Duo, that whiskey is shit. It’s not humanly possible to enjoy it.”

“Figure of speech.”

He’s grinning. I can hear it.

I smile, too. Though I will admit that the alcohol does help with the cold; the temperature is dropping and, sitting on top rather than lying inside my sleeping bag, I’m really feeling it. I dig through my duffel and pull on my only sweater.

Duo asks, “Did you like working at the circus?”

That’s right. It’s his turn again. “Working? I suppose so. I like living with the circus more. I’ve never had a home or family. How was scrap and salvage?”

“A pain in the ass, but it was what I needed at the time.” The liquor sloshes as Duo takes another drink. Presumably for the not-answer he’d given me.

The corner of my mouth twitches and I push my second question aside in favor of something frivolous, scouring my memory and landing on a moment that makes me grin. “Ever cleaned gerbil cages or vacuumed up fish turds?”

I think I’ve managed to shock Duo for a second time tonight. The words penetrate his brain and he snickers. “Um, no. No, I haven’t.”

“That’s odd,” I observe. “You spoke with such authority on the subject.”

“A vivid imagination?” he offers, grinning audibly again.

I arch a brow at him, momentarily forgetting that he probably can’t see my expression. I can hear the rustle of his movements against the fabric of his sleeping bag as he slouches or shifts. The bottle thunks down near my knee. I reach out a questing hand and grab the neck, surprised when I feel a flash of disappointment at not encountering Duo’s fingers.

“But, hey,” he continues, “if it makes you feel better, I really can’t see you working in a pet store.”

“Why not?”


I nod solemnly. “That would take the fun out of things.” I gulp down a second mouthful, waiting until I’ve safely swallowed to contemplate the fact that Duo’s lips and mine have touched the same circle of plastic.
“Boxers or briefs?” Duo dares and I laugh out loud. Of course he already knows the answer; we’ve been combining our laundry for the past week. “Briefs. You’re boxers.”

“Guilty as charged.”

I pass him the bottle. “Blondes or brunettes?”

He chokes a little on the liquor, but manages a wheeze, “Neither. Got a thing for silent types, though.”

I wonder if he’s winking at me. I hold out a hand for the bottle and the plastic surface gleams in the moonlight. Finally, there’s light to see by. “Someone who makes me laugh,” I reply. Is this flirting? Regardless, whatever I’m doing right now is something I’ve never done before. Well, not before this week. Before Duo.

“Truth or drink” has somehow become “truth and drink.” I don’t protest; I pass the whiskey back to him with every gambit. The moon continues to rise. I have to refuse the bottle when I feel the colony tilt beneath me.

“OK, this here is the big question,” Duo declares.

I roll my eyes and have to fist my hands in my sleeping bag for stability. “That’s what you said about the last one.”

“That was the big question then. This is the big question now,” he insists.

“Let’s have it, then.”

“Now. Let’s have it now,” he corrects.

“The question, Duo.”

“Okie dokie. Slippers, socks, or bare feet?”

“Never. Indoors only. Sometimes everywhere.”

“You’re a complicated man, Tro.”

“Say my name again.”

“Tro.”

I smile. “What pointless activity do you want to try someday?”

“Um… surfing! Yup. Surfing. But I’m a lousy swimmer. So.”


“Obviously. OK, what’s yours?”

“Shark diving.” I don’t know much about it, but it sounds interesting and needless, so I suppose that counts.

“What is it with you and predators?”

I open my mouth to offer something flippant and whiskey-induced, but shut it again. Instead, I take a
moment to gather my thoughts before I tell him, “I grew up among mercenaries. My first memories were of being a soldier.” This is true. I remember telling people that I’d been a soldier from the day I was born. But that’s not the point. “People kill for greed or ideals or power. Animals just do what they have to. And in killing, they…” Damn it, what’s the word? Make? Maintain? Ah! Got it — “They uphold the balance of nature rather than destroy it.”

Duo is silent for a long moment. Neither one of us reaches for the bottle. With surprising sobriety, Duo asks, “Do you ever think about the war in those terms? That the Gundams balanced rather than destroyed?”

For nearly a full minute, I can’t cobble together a response. In the end, I have to confess, “I try.”

I think it’s my turn to ask a question, but I can’t think of anything. I’m exhausted. Checking my watch, I wince at the time. “Duo?”

“Yeah, Tro?”

If I ever stop smiling when I hear him say my name, it’ll be a very sad day, indeed. “You wanna sleep with me tonight?”

“Sleep,” he repeats deliberately. His tone is flat, but somehow it feels like a question.

“For your nightmares.”

“Maybe I deserve nightmares. Ever think of that?”

“No. Not you.” Other people — people like me, for instance — deserve to have their worst fears carve out entire chambers of their heart, but not Duo. I’m certain of that much. “Not your heart.”

“My… heart?”

“It’s the most—” Damn, what’s the word? I give up. Start over. “You’re sky blue, Duo. And your heart’s the moon. It shows me what’s missing in me. I stopped killing my own heart a while ago, but I was born a soldier. Sometimes I still don’t know the difference. Is it unease or anticipation? It’s definitely electric.”

“What’s electric?”

Duo sounds closer. I like that. It makes me smile. “You and I have been drinking from the same bottle.”

“Hmm,” he agrees. “I think we’re done with that for tonight.” His hands find my shoulders and I let him shove and push me down into my sleeping bag. “Y’know, I was wondering what you’d be like drunk.”

“I am drunk,” I inform him.

“Yes, you are.”

“Sleep here.” I hold out an arm.

“Uh, are you sure?”

I grab the waistband of his jeans, tugging him close. He gasps, though I don’t know why. “Sleep here,” I insist, wrapping him up in my arms and legs. “No nightmares.”
Whatever Duo has to say about that, I don’t hear. I fall like a stone.

Chapter End Notes

Solo is not mine, but he’s not mentioned in detail in “Episode Zero.”

I can’t remember if I’ve mentioned basketball in the notes yet: Duo is pretty good at basketball. He teamed up with Heero to kick some butt at a school they were undercover at in the beginning of the series.

“I’ve been a soldier since I was born” is a quote from Trowa in Episode Zero.

Trowa’s remark near the end of the drinking game, “I stopped killing my own heart a while ago,” refers to the brief interaction he has with Dorothy near the end of the series as he rescues an injured Quatre from the mobile doll control room and disables the computer therein. The original comment is something like: “I’ve been killing my own heart, but I have to keep fighting. I’ve got a home to go back to.”
The Franklins

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: language, angst


Music recs: “Ghost” by One Less Reason & "Hemorrhage (In My Hands)" by Fuel

See the end of the chapter for more notes

… TROWA …

I roll over to avoid the light.

My headache rolls with me, doubling. Pounding through my sinuses.

With that agony comes others: my mouth is dry and sticky; my eyes are watery; every muscle in my body aches from fatigue; my shins feel skinned and bruised.

I recall darkness and the edge of a bottle gleaming in the moonlight. And whiskey. Words and more whiskey, and then nightmare after nightmare after nightmare. Not mine — it hadn’t been my nightmares jerking us both awake with muffled cries, gasps, and pedaling feet — but Duo’s.

Oh, hell.

“Hey…” A single syllable on a soft breath. “Here’s the water.” Hard plastic bumps my forearm. Gritting my teeth, I roll my head up and a strong hand slides underneath to cradle my skull. I sip the promised water. This seems familiar somehow…

Oh. Damn. Had it only been yesterday when I’d held Duo’s shivering body against mine and tipped whiskey into his mouth?

“I’m never drinking again,” I vow, pushing the gag-worthy refiltered water away.

Duo chuckles. “I’ve been meaning to ask when the last time you got shitfaced was.”

“Never.”

“That explains a lot.”

“I have to piss.”

“Copy that. Can you make it downstairs?”

“I piloted a Gundam,” I growl, shoving at the sleeping bag.

“I was there; I remember. Doesn’t answer my question, though.”
At this point, the priority is action over words. Unfortunately, action is also more painful. Duo loops one of my arms over his shoulders and pulls me to my knees. I bite back a groan as the headache causes starbursts to flash behind my closed eyelids.

Boots on my feet. Stairs underfoot. Duo’s arm around my waist.

I smell the toilet before I see it.

When Duo’s fingers work the button and zipper of my pants, I snap into focus. “I’ve got this.”

“Yup. Just gonna be over here.”

I glance his way as I tug cloth out of the line of fire. Duo is leaning against the sink, staring into the mirror. Face pale and eyes bloodshot. I remember my stinging, aching shins. With a wince, I empty my bladder. Finishing up, I say, “I’m sorry.”

“For this? This here’s a space-slide. No worries.”

I almost shake my head, but think better of it. “Last night.”

“What about it?”

“Your nightmares. I’m sorry.”

“Tro, I’m the one who kicked the shit outta you. If anyone gets an apology, it’s you.”

“Coffee,” I decide. Despite my misery, my lips still twitch into a grin at the sound of my name. “Apologize to me with coffee.”

“You got it. Stay here.” He pushes me down onto the second step of the attic trapdoor. “I’ll get our shit.”

I check my watch, close my eyes, and sigh. Whiskey. Never again.

The next time I check my watch, twenty minutes have passed and my nose is twitching with the scent of colony coffee. Duo steers me to a shadowy seat, leaves his things on the chair opposite mine, and disappears. I can hear his voice over the din coming from the cafe’s kitchen and I swallow against a surge of warm saliva.

The thought of food is not appealing. It is, however, preferable to contemplating how totally I’d failed Duo last night. He’d needed me and I hadn’t been able to help him. And to top it all off, I’m making him buy me coffee. What is wrong with me?

The cafe is stifling. I pull my sweater off and spread it over the back of my chair. Leaning my elbows on the table, I cradle my head in my hands and concentrate on breathing.

The slow scrape of a metal cup against the tabletop rouses me. The steam from this morning’s space blend special wafts against my dry skin and I look up as Duo sits down. There’s a basket of six round scones or biscuits, a bowl of some kind of soup, I think, and a dish of something that is either fruit-flavored jam or a regurgitated salamander.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“Uh-huh,” Duo says doubtfully.

“What? I mean it.”
“I know, but you haven’t tasted it yet.” He holds up a hand when I frown. “I’ll let it slide just this once.”

I huff out a breath. Only Duo would forgive me for thanking him prematurely for—

What the—!

My face screws up and I shudder as the first sour, burnt-beyond-recognition sip coats my tongue. My stomach rolls as I force myself to swallow. “Ugh,” I complain on a shudder.

Duo hides a smile behind his own cup.

I croak, “This is terrible.”

“You bet it is.”

“Thank you, Duo.”

“I—say what?”

I smirk. Either the caffeine or his flummoxed expression already has me feeling miles better. Nowhere near good enough to dare a taste of the soup or salamander, but I’m brave enough to try a biscuit. Duo nudges the basket in my direction when I reach over.

“Man, if this isn’t the worst cup of coffee you’ve ever had, I… y’know, actually, the coffee from the place we ate at last night is worse. Never mind.”

I sip, wince, and pick apart a biscuit. I pop a bite in my mouth and, amazingly, my stomach settles a little. I feel marginally less… bile-green.

Seeing this, Duo teases, “You had me fooled. That night outside the market, when you were doing the whole pause-before-the-puke number, I figured you were drawing from experience.”

“I’m pretty good at faking it.”

“So… what you’re telling me is last night wasn’t good for you after all.”

I choke on my second bite of biscuit. Clear my throat. Come back swinging: “I’ll say this much — you sure know how to show a guy a hell of a time.”

Duo, for lack of a better word, snorfles. “No one can say I’m not… memorable.”

I can’t speak for the rest of the Earth Sphere United Nation, but I know I’ll never forget Duo Maxwell. “What’s the drinking age on this colony?” I suddenly think to ask.

Duo smirks. “The ability to pay your tab.”

“Seriously.”

He shrugs. “Facial hair helps.”

“And in the case of women?”

“I was talking about the women.”

I laugh. Out loud. Oh, it hurts — my head is killing me — but it also feels amazing. Especially
after the week we’ve had… and the last two weeks I’ve had. Hell, the entire, humorless life I’ve had.

Duo attacks his breakfast with a smile, alternating between dabs of jelly-salamander and dollops of thick soup on his biscuits. He consumes four of the latter, scraping both dishes clean. My squirming stomach is very satisfied with only two and my coffee, which I finish with some regret.

Duo pushes his half-full cup at me. “All yours,” he invites, reminding me of that moment at the site of the future church when our gazes had snagged and tangled over the cold water spigot.

“Electric.” The sound of my own voice from the night before echoes between my ears. It’s the same feeling now as then. Electric.

Duo glances away before I can catch his eye. He shifts to the side, frowns, rifles through his backpack, and pulls out the book I’d glimpsed. For a moment, he just stares at the unmarked binding, his fingers tightening, loosening, and tightening again. After a long moment, he carefully sets it on the table between us. “Something to read with your coffee.”

He stands.

I reach for his sleeve.

“I’ll be back in a bit.” His voice is strained. I don’t like it. “We need water and I’m almost out of sanitizer and—”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No. Please.” Finally, he looks at me. The coffee has helped him wake up, but he still has horrible bruises under his eyes. I’d probably gotten more sleep than he had last night. He says thickly, “I can’t be here while you read… that. I can’t.”

My fingertips drift over the leather cover. So, this is where his secrets lie. “You don’t have to share this with me.”

“Yeah, I do.”

I direct, “Then sit at another table. Don’t leave.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s broad daylight and I look like shit. Hell, I’ll even stay on Main Street.”

He thinks I’m worried about skin hunters. I am, but that’s not the only reason I want him to stay. I’m afraid he’ll reconsider whatever had caused him to suddenly value his own life. If he walks out that door, what are the chances he’ll come back? Anything less than one-hundred percent is too great a risk, a risk I’m not willing to take. I fumble for something, some sort of insurance, some tangible tie to me.

His hand cups my shoulder. He squeezes firmly. “Gimme two hours. I’ll be back.”

“One hour,” I negotiate.

“Ninety minutes.”

I nod.

With a forced smile, he walks away. I don’t turn back around until the door shuts behind him. When I do, I see his backpack and camp roll on the seat opposite. OK, maybe I do have some
insurance that he’ll be back.

I do my best to ignore the fact that Duo had been more than willing to leave these things behind when he’d considered taking his own life. At least I still have possession of the liquid courage.

I flip idly through the volume. The majority of the book is blank. There is virtually no way I’ll need more than an hour to read what little has been handwritten on these pages, unless Duo thinks I’ll have to sound out the words.

Which is ridiculous. So, why would Duo—?

A photograph flutters loose from between the pages.

I can feel my eyes widen as I absorb the image. A sick feeling that has nothing to do with whiskey comes over me. The happy family smiles up from within the white borders of the picture and I think I know what it is that torments Duo in his nightmares, why he can’t speak of them or tell me the whole story. Yes, I’d caught his moments of omission yesterday. I was sure he’d had his reasons.

Which I’m now about to find out.

With care, I set the photo aside. My hand smooths over the binding of what I suspect is a personal diary. I indulge in a deep breath and then I open to the cover page.

… DUO …

I’ve always liked parks. Even if they are kinda pointless. They have zero cover for good hiding places, not a damn thing worth stealing, and a bunch of rich brats who like pushing smaller kids off the swings. So, don’t ask me why I like the damn places. Maybe because of what they represent: innocence.

Yeah, I think that must be it. Innocence is in short supply ‘round these parts. I think whatever bit of it I’d had left in me must’ve died with Solo. It’s hard — damn near impossible — to come away from watching your friends die from a disease that’s curable for a few measly creds and somehow still believe in miracles.

Father Maxwell and Sister Helen had tried to show me otherwise. They might have eventually managed it if they hadn’t died. If it hadn’t been me who had made a bad situation irreparably worse.

Yeah, me sneaking onto the Alliance base and stealing a mobile suit just to get those damn rebels to back off: that had not helped at all. Not one bit. The rebels probably would have bit the big one, regardless, but Father Maxwell and Sister Helen… their deaths are on me.

Oh, God. They would be so disappointed in me if they could see me now. If they could have seen me then, too — if they’d watched as I’d used the stolen Alliance mobile suit to pretty much buy my way into the local rebel group. It’d taken years to quietly rebuild from their losses after the Maxwell Church Tragedy, but they’d finally had the unspoken support of the local people.

I remember the day I’d finally made those Alliance bastards pay. Black smoke billowing along the curve of the colony. Cheering and rioting in the streets. If I’d been suicidal enough to stick around, they might have given me a parade.

Jesus.
I turn away from the thought and bury my nose in the weave of the knitted sweater I’m wearing. It isn’t mine; I’d stolen it — but really, that’s not anything new or shocking, considering — and, to be perfectly honest, the sweater isn’t very well-made. It’s a little old. Just beginning to go threadbare in the elbows and under the arms. I’d get two creds for it on the street. Or a ten-cred favor after dark.

It’s worth a helluvalot more than than that to me, though. This here is my pathetic insurance that Trowa will still be at that cafe in just over an hour. So that he can take the damn thing back before he washes his hands of me and walks away.

I sit on the wooden park bench with my legs drawn up, my arms looped around my knees, and let the sounds of the nearby traffic on Main Street wash over me. The sweater is big on me — again, no surprise there — and the cuffs come down over my fingers. I like that. It makes it easier to imagine that the weight of the knitted yarn is the weight of actual arms and the body heat that it reflects back at me is from someone else. A real embrace.

A chance at forgiveness.

Not that I’ve ever tried to convince myself — not even for a blink of an eye — that Trowa can be part of that. The best I’m hoping for is, well, another hug, I guess. Another moment like that one where Trowa had sat with me, locking his arms and legs around me and holding on tight. That had been… really nice. And a little surprising that Trowa and the word “lover” — and not “boss” or “boy-ya” — had shared a seat on that particular train of thought. In fact, that brief moment of insanity, that tickle of intimacy and equality, had been a little better than nice.

This sweater had been there, a silent witness to that moment.

This sweater… I sigh. Maybe I’m just torturing myself with the possibility. No, there’s no “maybe” about it. I am definitely torturing myself.

Well, why not just dive the hell in, right? Regardless of whether this sweater had been a half-assed attempt at a neutral Christmas present, handmade by Cathy, or a bargain bin find at a low-end department store, it has Trowa’s scent all over it. I tilt my head the other way and inhale along the opposite sleeve. Bury my nose in the scrunched up weave.

Here in these little, sheltered alcoves — in these quiet spaces — it’s easiest to find him.

It’s kind of ironic, right? Trowa had come all this way to find me and here I am, doing my damndest to find him in the elbows of a fucking sweater.

I laugh. It startles a stray cat. I laugh harder.

A long time ago, I’d decided that it was OK to cry if you were laughing. So while the chuckles are coming, I think back to eight days ago: crashing into Trowa outside the store. I take that moment out, hold it up to the light, watch the patterns that emerge. I’ve always been a sucker for stained glass windows, too.

Trowa’s arrival on this wretched piece of shit of a colony… now that had been a miracle.

“Is it too late to start believing?” I would have asked Sister Helen.

“Never,” she would have promised.

Would’ve, could’ve, should’ve.

I sigh again. I’m risking it all—everything I have in my sorry life—for what?
For the chance to stop running and hiding from just one single solitary soul.

I want him to know.

Though I never would have expected it, that doesn’t make it any less true that Trowa has become the closest friend I’ve had in a really long time. Who else would I tell these horrors to? Who else would I have a shot at halving this burden with? One thing is for sure: if I don’t find another set of shoulders to carry this load with me, I will break.

God damn it. After all the shit I’ve been through, this is what threatens to do me in.

I guess that means I’m not much of a heartless bastard. Should have put that down for my New Year’s resolution, right? Too late now.

At least I’m here. And I’m facing it, just like Heero had told me to do.

I guess I’ll be finding out if the advice is any good. Seventy-one minutes from now.

And that’s another thing: I’d been so sure that Heero would get it, but at the last possible moment, the words just hadn’t come. I’d choked. Me. Duo Maxwell. Choking at the big moment. Unbelievable.

But Heero’d been waiting for me to cough up the rest of the thought I’d started, so I’d come out with some bullshit about not knowing what to do with myself without a war to fight. It hadn’t been a lie. I’d just omitted a whole fucking lot.

Thank God I had. I don’t think I would have even made it this far if I’d poured out all my dark secrets just to have Heero hand me a dish towel and tell me to mop up my mess. Turn off the lights before you go to bed. See you in the morning. Coffee’s at five o’clock sharp.

I giggle.

A giggle is a kind of laugh, so the crying rule still applies.

It doesn’t matter what Heero would have done. It doesn’t matter if Quatre would have given decent hugs. It doesn’t matter if Wufei would have taken me to the Preventers gym so we could beat the snot and regret out of each other. All that matters now is if I’m going to return to an empty table at a second-rate cafe.

Once I find the courage to go back.

Not sure what I’ll do if he’s gone — fuck the sweater, insurance or no — but I doubt I’ll be getting around to helping Reverend Jamesson raise the walls of his new church… or having those promised chats with Pinky, Darl, Morisa, and Jebb on his behalf.

It’s game over and all I’ve got are three desperate words that could be a prayer except I’m terrified of God — my God, the only god I’ve ever known, the God of Death — overhearing and answering my three-word prayer in the worst way. Again.

So I don’t say it aloud. My lips move against the weave of the sweater sleeve. I’m sure I don’t deserve a miracle, but I can’t not breathe those three words and my stupid hope into the chilly, colony air:

“Please don’t leave.”
This journal is the property of Captain Kurt Franklin.

I carefully examine the inscription on the cover page, seeking anything that might counter my suspicions. All I have is the photo and this, but I can guess what I’m about to read. Would it be a waste of energy to hope that I’m wrong?

Gently and with trepidation, I turn the page and begin.

A.C. 179: Sylvia, my beautiful, amazing Sylvia, is pregnant! I’m in shock. I was in shock when she told me and I still can’t believe it now, hours later. Although I did somehow manage to convince her that I’m thrilled. I think it might have been my picking her up and twirling her around the room. Or perhaps it was my laughter. It’s been so long since we’ve had something to celebrate. I wonder, now, if it’s wise to bring a child into this world, this war. But perhaps this conflict will end soon. Perhaps things will settle. I can only hope my work with the Alliance will bring about peace. I can only hope this world will be a safe place for my Sylvia and our child...

A.C. 180: It’s a boy! My Jesse! I never thought this day would come. I must have imagined looking down at my son millions of times, but the reality to so much more! I feel such love... And my need to keep him safe, to watch him grow up... I’ve never felt this strongly before. My son is a miracle. My Sylvia is a miracle. They are my reason for seeking peace. They are my reason for living. They are my everything. Oh, Jesse, there is so much out there for you to discover. I can barely contain my urge to show everything to you right now. Never before have I felt it: the incredible possibilities that the future holds. Someday, when you have a son or daughter of your own, you will know what I am talking about. But for now you’re mine to protect and love and watch over. My son. My miracle.

A.C. 181: I don’t think I’ll ever forget today. I know I’ll never want to. Your first birthday, Jesse! Your first presents and cake, although not your first mess. Sylvia’s still in the shower trying to get the frosting out of her hair. All of her friends warned her not to keep her long hair after you were born, but she didn’t listen. And I’m glad. You love that braid almost as much as she does! So now it’s the end of the day and you’re asleep in your crib. You probably won’t remember this day, but I will. You give me so much, son. And I love you so very, very much.

A.C. 182: Well, you were definitely louder this year than last! “Mommy, I want this” and “Daddy, I want that”... Oh, God but you’re a handful. I don’t know how Sylvia does it. Just watching you wears me out! I feel so old next to you, but that light in your eyes—eyes just like my Sylvia’s—makes me feel so young. You’re going to do great things, Jesse. You’re so special. I can’t imagine how other people could possibly miss that sparkle of yours. Every day you amaze me. And sometimes you even downright startle me. You’re so smart. I could tell you didn’t believe me when I told you the stork brought you to Mommy and I. You just gave me that look you have. And then you laughed. And I couldn’t stop myself from laughing with you.

A.C. 183: I can’t believe you want your hair to look just like Sylvia’s. My own son with long hair. I’d shake my head and mutter if not for the fact that I love you more with each passing day. Sylvia thinks you’ll outgrow this, but I don’t think so. You’re a rebellious spirit, Jesse. Nothing could ever be boring and ordinary for you. I imagine that you’ll be an artist or adventurer or something equally reckless and risky. You’ll certainly never grow up to be a soldier like your old man! Not with long hair, anyway! Jesse, I hope you never have to know what it’s like to live in this world I wade out into every day. I hope I can keep you safe. But you’re so bright, so alive. I fear smothering you and forcing that light from your eyes. But how else can I protect you with this war
going on? My son, I hope you don’t live to hate me for bringing you into a place such as this.

A.C. 184: I look back over my previous entries and realize what a complete and utter fool I have been. I am only one man. An Alliance soldier. A target. That is why you both were taken from me. My Jesse. My Sylvia. You were just walking down the street to go to the bakery to find the perfect cake for the party tomorrow. Jesse, you would have been four years old. And you’ve paid for my inability to suppress the rebel groups. They tell me it was instantaneous, that you didn’t feel any pain. I suppose I can be grateful for that much at least. But what am I to do now? Do I simply give up? End it all? Let those who triggered the bomb win? I wanted peace. I worked for it. I dreamed about it until I could taste it. Now... now it doesn’t matter anymore. My miracles are gone. And all that’s left is an Alliance soldier. Not a man, just a machine of war.

A.C. 188: What have I done? We finally cornered the rebel group responsible for the deaths of my wife and son. Finally, I am allowed my vengeance. I barely read the report I was so eager to finish this, to finally know that Sylvia and Jesse’s souls are at peace. I signed the papers. I ordered the strike. May God forgive me. Two-hundred and forty-five people are dead. Maxwell Church, the orphanage, the orphans... all gone. What have I done? I had not thought living could be any more hellish, but I was wrong. Hell cannot be worse than this. And there is no way I can redeem myself. But there is nowhere left for me to go. I am an Alliance soldier in a world that hates and despises us. I am no longer an innocent bystander or well-meaning agent of peace. What I’ve done is so completely reprehensible. I deserve death. And, once, I would have welcomed it. Would have welcomed being with my Sylvia and my Jesse again. But now I know I’ll not be joining them. They are far, far beyond my reach for all eternity.

A.C. 192: I... I can’t believe it. I... Oh, dear God, don’t fool with me like this! Please, please... Wait, I must get myself under control. Start from the beginning... The guards found an intruder. A young boy. I was off-duty so they just locked him up. They threw a child in a detention cell. How could I have ever thought the Alliance was a benign organization? How could I have been so blind? If they are willing to treat a boy like this...? As soon as I heard about the prisoner, I reprimanded the officers who confined him and then I went to visit him. I looked into the cell and saw him. Thin, lanky, and covered in black from head to toe. I tried to talk to him, but he only smirked at me. I asked for his name and all he would say is ‘Shinigami.’ And then he turned away from me and I saw it. The long rope of brown hair. I felt my heart begin to beat faster, felt the hope—that hated, irrepressible hope—begin to build inside of me. I said something derisive, I don’t remember what. I just wanted to get him to look me in the eye. And he did. And I saw his eyes. Even from beneath the brim of his hat, I couldn’t mistake those eyes. Sylvia’s royal blue eyes. So dark they’re nearly violet. So wide they mesmerize. Oh, God, tell me it’s true. Tell me that’s my Jesse! I have to order the DNA test in the morning. I have to make sure the guards treat him well. I can get him out of this. I must get him out of this. Oh, Jesse. You looked right through me. You don’t remember me. You don’t remember how much I love you. But it’s not too late. We can start over. Be a family again. Please, Jesse, just give me one chance to make it right. I love you so, so much.

Automatically, I flip to the next page, but it’s blank.

Of course it’s blank.

The explosion that Duo had spent days setting up on the base in secret had erupted shortly after Kurt Franklin had written the final entry and placed this diary in his personal safe. A safe that Duo would later buy the rights to, uncover, and crack the code to. Whatever he’d expected to find within, this had not been it.

I carefully put the diary aside and pick up the photograph. The man with brown hair and a neat, thick mustache is Kurt. The woman with blond hair in a loose braid hanging over her shoulder and
down to her waist is Sylvia. The toddler they hold between them with shaggy brown hair and almost-violet eyes is Jesse.

Jesse Franklin is Duo Maxwell.

And Duo Maxwell is the rebel soldier who had destroyed the Alliance base and killed everyone within.

I tuck the photograph safely within the pages of the unfinished diary, lean back in my seat, and close my eyes. For a moment, I let myself be pulled into the clangs and clanks from the kitchen, the increasingly frequent chiming of the bell over the door, the sudden hiss of steam, and the tide-like murmurings of the customers. In the shadow of the far wall in this filling cafe, I consider the incredible fact that Duo has withstood this pain for as long as he has. Evidence for a miracle if there ever has been.

I don’t have to ask myself if this is why I’d dreamed of Duo. It no longer matters.

This is why I’m here now and it’s why I’m going to stay.

Chapter End Notes

The timeline in Kurt Franklin’s diary is meant to line up with the events in “Episode Zero” although the family moments in Kurt Franklin’s personal log are my own creation. Duo’s imprisonment in an Alliance cell is, I’m reasonably certain, something that is shown in “Episode Zero” even though there’s no mention of why he got arrested. He’s even wearing his priest’s outfit, so I’m inferring he has already decided to get revenge (in some fashion) for the deaths of Father Maxwell and Sister Helen.
It’s been ninety minutes, but I still don’t move from the bench. Which is pretty impressive given that I’m freezing my balls off sitting in the shade of a building here. Hell, I’m shivering hard enough from the cold and my own nerves to crack the enamel on my teeth. But as long as I’m here, I have a fifty-fifty shot that Trowa’s still waiting for me.

I pull the sleeves of the sweater over my hands and go back to hugging both legs to my chest. I drape my left arm over my knees and nuzzle the fabric. After an hour and a half spent in recycled air, it no longer smells like Trowa. Not even a whiff of musk in the armpit. It’s truly pathetic, but, yes, I’d checked. I have the memory of Trowa’s scent, though, and it’s sad how much that means to me. I should be thankful that I’m allowed even that much. I have no memory of my mother. A brief, hate-colored recollection of the man who just might have been my father. I guess you could say I travel light.

Har har.

But.

If Trowa’s really gone, then at least I have this dumb, funky, too-large sweater. It might just be the warmest article of clothing that Trowa had brought with him. It was definitely the item he had dressed me in without hesitation. Maybe that doesn’t mean much to someone who has always had a home with central heating or loving arms at their disposal. But to me — to the little boy who’d had to survive on the streets, who’d been cold and hungry more often than not, who is aware of how rare pure, genuine kindness is — this stretched-out, lived-in sweater sums up everything I’ve ever wanted.

Yeah. If Trowa’s long gone, then I’ll still have this. I’m just not sure if it’ll be better than nothing… or worse. Not that it matters. They’ll have to pry it from my cold, dead fingers.

If Trowa has cleared out, then, OK. It’s fine. I tell myself that the memories will be enough. They damn well ought to be. Because I don’t have any right to expect more than that.

So, I’m already late. Time to get going.

I shove myself up off of the park bench. The motion startles a stray cat. Probably the same one as before. It’d circled back when I wasn’t paying attention. It leaps behind a distant lamp post and glares at me. I look into its wide eyes and it hits me: if Trowa really is still waiting for me, he’ll have
questions. He’ll want explanations.

Fuck. I don’t have any contingencies for this.

Didn’t want to jinx myself, I guess.

I force my feet to move—slowly—toward the street and the cafe just down the block. When I spot a general store, I remember my excuse for taking off in the first place: necessities.

I push the door open and blindly walk the aisles. Wandering. Wondering.

What am I gonna say to him?

OK, maybe an apology. For having a thing for his sweater. Definitely that. And needing him in my life even though I obviously don’t deserve any kind of happiness. Less certain I’m comfortable with that level of groveling, but I’ll keep it in reserve. Just in case.

I could apologize for the things I’d done, for the whole sorry mess that has been the sum total of my life, but who should I be saying “I’m sorry” to? Do I owe Trowa an additional apology? For letting him down, for disappointing him? What kind of expectations had he even had of me, anyway? And would it even be my fault if he did?

Not gonna be making any headway on that one. Moving on.

Explanations. Our field trip the other day should have covered most of it. Still, I try to anticipate what’s left to say. Working that out is better than dealing with the fact that I’m one step closer to dealing with the fallout.

I grab two new jugs of refiltered water, some sanitize gel, some snacks that should survive the zombie apocalypse — whenever that finally happens — and a couple other odd items. I’m distracted enough to pay for everything, but I remember to haggle until I get a small discount. It helps that there are two customers waiting in line behind me. Any other day, I would have smirked my way out the door.

Not right now, though. I’m just not feeling it.

As I wait at a traffic light, I decide that my best plan of action is to apologize and state firmly and clearly that Trowa can walk away if he wants to. No hard feelings.

I grin. Test drive my friendly smile. I don’t have a reflective surface nearby, but it feels convincing from my angle.

So. That will be the real test. If Trowa is actually waiting for me in that cafe, will he take the out? And what if he doesn’t?

Oh, shit. What if the impossible happens and he stays? After all the apologies and shit, what if he stays? What would that even mean?

The ever-present chill slithers past the weave of the sweater and I shiver. That’s when I realize that the test has nothing to do with what Trowa says or doesn’t say, does or doesn’t do, asks or doesn’t ask. The test is mine:

Am I gonna be able to look him in the eye knowing that he knows?

Maybe.
Maybe not.

But I’m sure as shit not going to know one way or the other until I try.

Right. Here goes.

I push open the cafe door and, swallowing hard, force myself to look toward our table. From here I can see that someone is sitting there. A guy. Trowa’s height and build. I glimpse two Allie bags, a familiar duffel, my backpack. I allow a closer look at the figure in the seat. It is Trowa. Hair still sticking up at awkward angles and all.

Oh, God. I just—I can’t believe it.

I shuffle over, noting the hand that’s lying on top of the closed journal. The empty coffee cups. The bangs. I stop next to the table.

He doesn’t move.

I sidestep, leaning over in the direction of my chair and—

I don’t fucking believe this.

Trowa Barton is asleep.

Well, now. Isn’t this a plot twist and a half? Of all the scenarios I’d imagined and dreaded and God damn planned for, he chooses the one – the only one – I hadn’t considered. Of course. What an asshole.

I think I manage to glare for all of ten seconds before I feel my lips curve. He is kind of a cute asshole, though. But sleeping like that is gonna kill his back and I do not have the massage magic that he does.

So, I guess I’d better wake him up. Get this over with.

I slide into my vacated chair on a sigh.

“Duo?”

I jump, caught between ogling him and dreading his reaction to the journal—hell, I’m just plain caught.

Trowa blinks open his eyes.

I clear my throat and my quiet tone surprises me, “Yeah, Tro. It’s me. I’m back.”

“Yes, you are.” He slides the journal towards me. When I pick it up, he stands, collects our used mugs and dishes, and places them in the tub bound for the cafe’s dish washer. He grabs his Allie bag and duffel, angles his head toward the door and asks, “Ready?”

Not remotely, but what the hell. I summon my gumption and ask, “Where to?”

“Somewhere quiet.”

Oh, fuck. That cannot be good. “You sure? The space port is, um…”

“No space port, Duo. A house. Any house.”
“OK.”

Trowa takes one of the refiltered water jugs from me. He eyes the shopping bag in my other hand, but doesn’t ask. Figuring the additional distance from the street might be a good idea, just in case yelling and shouting happens, I take us back to the two-story house. Reconnoiter the inside. Clamor up to the attic. Use the twine to lock us in.

Right. So. Here we are.

Trowa dumps his duffel on the floor. Unfurls the Allie bag. Sits. Watches me watching him, those damn green eyes so fucking steady. He looks bored, but I know it’s an act. Practiced nonchalance.

He makes the first move, patting the surface of the bedding beside him.

Well, that is definitely an invitation. And who am I to refuse? Isn’t this what I want? What I was hoping for? Not the talking shit that’s gotta happen, but him. Here. With me.

I take a single step in his direction.

Trowa’s expression doesn’t change. No flash of victory or accusation or pity. Nothing.

It’s that very lack of readable emotion that makes me hesitate.

“Duo?”

He’s good. He’s real good at being careful. He’s careful with me. He’s always been real careful with me. Hell, even back during the war when Wufei and I had been prisoners and Trowa’d joined sides with Une and he’d fucking gut punched me in order to pass me the info on our rebuilt Gundams—talk about overkill. I’d had plenty of pockets for him to slip the hand-held projector into, thank you very much, but OK, yeah, I’d been bored and talking shit and I’d totally instigated it, but that’s not the point. The point is that, even then, he’d been careful to knock the wind out of me without actually doing any real damage.

Trowa doesn’t want to—isn’t going to—hurt me.

And that pisses me off. It pisses me off and I have no fucking clue what to do with all this restless anger, anger that I’d been able to set aside for a little while but it isn’t really gone completely. I have no fucking clue what to do except cross my arms over my chest and glare his stupid duffel bag into submission. Yeah, cower before me, you crappy pile of canvas. Just like that.

I challenge him: “You know, it’s OK if you’ve changed your mind. I get it.”

I glance his way. No reaction. Jesus, what else am I expecting? Trowa’s not gonna show his hand until he’s good and ready. We’d learned much the same life lessons as kids. But where I poke at people until I find a weak point, Trowa sits back and waits for an opening.

It’s unnerving.

I go back to staring down the duffel bag and I tell him straight out, biting off every word, “You don’t have to stay here just because you said you would.”

It’s not as if I could make him.

But he’s clearly not in any rush to catch a shuttle.

Scanning his expression and gauging his tension, I realize I’ve seen this look and posture before…
and it kinda freaks me out that I’m seeing it here and now. This is the watchful gaze of a hunter. And just what is he so carefully observing, studying, scrutinizing? Me. And just why would he bother unless he is hunting me. Unless there’s something from me that he wants.

This is… just unbelievable.

Just… what the hell does he want from me? What exactly does he think I’ve got to offer anyway?

I tense up. I get defensive. And when I get both tense and defensive, I tend to—

“I mean, you didn’t know jack shit about this whole sorry story when you promised to hang out here and all — which was a dumb move, pal, because you should’ve asked what kind of hell you were signing up for — still, I don’t expect you to stick around if you wanna go and, if I’m being honest, I figured you’d bail long before this but I’m—I’m—”

I squeeze my eyes shut as something forces its way through the sting of my irritation. A soul-deep ache that I can’t stop or deal with right now. It bypasses my brain and heads right for my mouth and I hear myself blather, “I’m really glad I told you and all because I needed to and I feel better knowing I’m not the only one who knows anymore so—”

“Duo.”

I choke back the rest of the bullshit. I’ve said my piece. More than enough of it, anyway. My fingers curl, clawing into the sweater sleeves as I brace myself for the inevitable.

“Do you want me to go?”

I blink. “That’s…” Not what I was expecting. “That’s not the point. I extracted a promise from you under false pretenses which isn’t fair to you and I get that life’s not fair but—”

Gently, Trowa interrupts, “That’s not how I remember it. I offered. Of my own volition.”

“But new information has kinda come to light here that’s changed things—”

“Not what’s important,” Trowa cuts in.

I shut up. I’m done. Tag, you’re it.

The watchfulness makes way for something else. A connection. Trowa doesn’t move an inch, but he reaches out with that look and repeats, “Do you want me to go?”

“God damn it, Tro. That’s not what this is about!”

“What is it about?”

“What do you want?”

Trowa doesn’t answer right away. I take two deep breaths and maybe—just maybe—my head won’t explode after all.

Maybe he can tell, somehow, that I’ll be able to really listen to him when he speaks, because that’s when he says, “The same thing you want, I think. For the nightmares to stop.”

Wait. What?

My frustration fizzles out and I look past the proverbial hangman’s noose dangling in front of my
face and I see him. I see him. I see him.

“Tro. You still...?”

He glances away from my bafflement with a helpless little shrug. “Is that so hard to believe?”

I need—I need a moment. I close my eyes, lean a my forearm against the nearest beam. Think.

Is it possible that this isn’t about Trowa trying to let me off the hook, like I’d feared? When he’d gone into hunter mode, is this what he’d been looking for?

Trowa... needs me, too?

How can he even think that I’d be anything but total shit at doing for him what he’s done for me? I shake my head. “But, Tro... I haven’t done anything except be a fucking siphon ever since you got here!”

Trowa differs, “No. You’ve leaned once or twice. That’s all.”

“But I don’t want to lean ‘once or twice,’” I protest and then I bare my soul, “I want to lean all the God damned time!”

Trowa takes a breath but I force myself to talk over him.

“And at the same time I don’t want to lean at all. I’ve survived growing up on the streets, rebel groups and pilot training, a God damn war! I’m stronger than this. I shouldn’t need—”

“You are the strongest person I know,” Trowa tells me bluntly, sincerely.

This. Oh, God do I need this. Him. Him and his steady voice and his unblinking stare and his belief in me.

It hurts. It hurts so much because, more than anything, I want it to be true.

He continues, “You have withstood more than anyone could ever be expected to endure.” He pauses, then continues more quietly, “You earned my respect a long time ago, Duo. And my trust. You still have both.”

I can’t deal with this. I can’t fight this. The past week has been hell and my heart is too broken and I just can’t hold it together anymore.

I turn and slump against the angled roof. Close my eyes. Give ground. “I... I don’t want to lose them.”

“You haven’t. You won’t.”

Opening my eyes and staring down at the crack where the floor panels meet, I warn him with the last of my strength, “That’s a hell of a lot to promise a guy.”

“Look at me.”

I’d follow him into battle. The least I can do is look him in the eye.

His steady gaze holds me perfectly still. He replies, “It’s not a promise. It’s a future fact.”

For a moment, neither one of us moves. Then I’m back to hiding behind my eyelids again. My
breath hisses out from between my teeth. “This isn’t going the way I expected it to.”

“How so?”

“I thought... I...”

Trowa waits.

“I didn’t expect you to still be there when I got back.”

I open my eyes just in time to glimpse a flicker of rage, confrontation, and thinning patience in Trowa’s expression. His jaw clenches as he visibly bites back a retort. And then he sighs. He’s as tired as I am, but the next thing I know, we’re back to talking in circles:

Trowa asks, “Did you want me to be?”

I glare at the opposite wall, at the space above Trowa’s bedhead. I hate that I’m the one who has to lay it on the line, but I’ve got to admit, whether I like it or not, I’m the one who started all this. So it’s up to me to finish it. “I... did and I didn’t. I wanted you to be here but I didn’t want to have to face myself.”

“I’m not judging you.”

My mouth stretches upward in a rueful parody of a grin. “I wish you would.” And just get it over with.

Trowa’s seemingly indestructible patience snaps. “I caused the deaths of every mercenary in my troupe. I’m hardly qualified to pass judgment on you.”

I jerk, bodily. Like I’d just grabbed a hold of a live wire in a maintenance tunnel. I can’t even convince myself that I’d imagined his words, not while I’m face-to-face with his resignation. Fuck, that flat look in his eyes—I wish he’d punched me again instead.

“I... I am such an ass,” I apologize.

The corners of Trowa’s mouth lift upward. “You are not an ass. Just overwhelmed.”

I arch a disbelieving brow. “Just like that? I’m forgiven?”

“You’re too damn charming for anyone to stay mad at you for long,” Trowa says in a monotone that is strangely comforting.

“Even you,” I conclude with a genuine grin.

Trowa, in telling silence, concurs.

I smile until a thread of hope slips two bits of my broken heart back together. It’s not much, but it’s a start, I guess.

I figure that makes now a good time to quit. While I can still fool myself into thinking that I’m ahead.

I run my hands briskly over my face and through my bangs. “Shit, I’m tired.” And it’s only noon.

Accepting my blatant attempt to drop the conversation, Trowa nods. He leans forward and unzips the sleeping bag as I unlace and toe off my boots. But when Trowa would have slid beneath the
covers, I daringly reach out a hand to his shoulder. Stop him.

I meet his gaze and hold it as I slowly kneel in front of him, plant my knees on either side of his, and curl my free hand around his other shoulder. There’s no resistance, no refusal in him whatsoever, when I pull him toward me and into a loose embrace, an offer of something similar to the one he’d given me.

The next move is his. I wait.

He says, “You’re tired.”

“Not too tired for this.”

His arms loop around my waist. His forehead lowers to my shoulder. I scoot closer until our chests are pressed together. I inhale and his breath leaves him on a shudder.

I’d been right: Trowa can’t give me forgiveness. I can’t give him forgiveness, either. But I can grieve with him. I’d been an idiot to think that Trowa had escaped the messy tar pit of regret. The stains are all over both of us.

“This is my sweater,” he murmurs suddenly.

I snort, feeling suddenly giddy in the wash of his body heat. “You can have it back if I can have you.”

His fingers splay against my back. His chin lifts until his lips brush my ear. “Deal,” he agrees.

I swallow thickly. My fingers sift through the short hair at the back of his head, tugging but not taming the strands. “OK,” I answer, my heart pounding, my mind stunned and stuttering over his capitulation.

I don’t know what to do next.

When he pulls back, I don’t stop him. We share a look before Trowa silently slides beneath the covers, holds them up, and waits for me.

I surrender to the wordless request. Now he knows everything, pretty much, and I feel bare and jittery, but Trowa’s steady gaze calms me. I tuck myself in beside him, my back to his chest.

I can’t help thinking that my revelation should have ended very differently: I shouldn’t be settling into an Allie bag, warm and safe, with Trowa. I haven’t done anything to earn this, but I can’t seem to resist it, either. The heat from him slowly and relentlessly relaxes me until I’m just about melting along the length of his lean body. He tucks one arm under his own head for a pillow and the other slides over my side. His hand curls softly against my belly, below my heart.

“OK?” he checks, his breath puffing against my neck.

“Yeah. OK.”

More than OK. Is it supposed to feel this good to have someone next to you, someone who lets you lean into them and wraps an arm around you? Trowa nuzzles against the sweater that I still haven’t returned to him and I feel myself grin. This is amazing.

Why had it taken me so long to let myself enjoy it? Man, have I been missing out.
Chapter End Notes

Just how aware was Trowa/No-name of the fact that the Alliance had been hunting down his troupe? “Episode Zero” isn’t completely clear, but on some level, I think he knew that Midii (Mddie?) Une was a spy and yet he didn’t kill her or tell her to get lost when he encountered her while on guard duty. Instead, he brings her back to the troupe, suggests she work in the kitchen, and saves her life during a raid. At the end, after everyone in the troupe, including the captain, has been killed, he confronts her over her role.
The Negotiations

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: language, reference to gang violence and human trafficking, plus a very slippery moral slope (spoiler: this colony ain't for the faint of heart)

THIS CHAPTER IS A HEAVY READ so save it for when you've got time to sit down and go through it slowly.


Music Rec: “This Isn’t Everything You Are” by Snow Patrol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... TROWA ...

Monday morning finds me at Duo’s side, kneeling on the church site as he bangs the ends of the plastic molding together. Mortise and tenon and a heavy rubber mallet. We take turns swinging and steadying. I have no fear that he’ll hit my hands. Jamesson insists we wear gloves anyway.

“Can’t have any unprotected shenanigans, can we?” Duo muses aloud, but not loud enough for the reverend to hear.

“I don’t know,” I retort. “Can we?”

Duo cackles, low and deep in his throat, but he doesn’t pick up the gauntlet. I don’t push.

I’m still in awe of the fact that I can claim the honor of holding Duo’s secrets. I’ve never been given anything this powerful. I’m not sure that Heavyarms compares. Where my Gundam had had the ability to take life, the things I know about Duo could ruin a life. A fate worse than death.

I don’t want to hurt him, but I’m not sure that I won’t. I’ve never been a confidante to someone who matters to me before and I’m completely unclear on what my responsibilities are.

Manual labor, however, is refreshingly straightforward.

“All right, gentlemen. It looks like we’ve got the outer wall foundations ready. Next we need the supports for the load-bearing walls.”

Duo hands me the mallet as I stand and stretch. He collects the next set of molds, right side and left side. We work swiftly and without words as Jamesson talks us through the blueprints.

The way Duo and I share the tasks between us reminds me of how we share a single camp roll, using the second for additional padding. It brings to mind the way I ease the tension from his back and shoulders before bed and he makes me smile. It makes me think of how we’d navigated the streets on Sunday evening, touching base with scouts in each of the four nearby gang territories. Duo had spoken in thick slang and I’d kept my knife within easy reach. More than one set of eyes had stared
at me with disbelief bordering on amazement.

“They think you’re immune to sweet darts,” Duo had explained quietly as we’d crammed into my sleeping bag together. We’d spent the night at the top of the still unfinished office building. It had been cold but exhilarating to hold him so close. I’d been glad for an excuse to lessen the distance between us and Duo had seemed happy to be able to see the softly shining and twinkling “stars” in the light-studded, inverted dome.

“You can thank me anytime,” I’d dared, speaking of his rescue.

Duo had snorted. “Hell, I woulda had the time of my life dismantling a fucking slaver’s ship.”

That may be so, but I’d gone after him for more than just his own sake. “All by yourself with no one to admire your handiwork.”

“So, next time get your ass caught with mine. We’ll have ourselves a house on fire.”

“Hm.”

“Oh, wait. Hold up. That’s not gonna happen ’cuz you’re immune to sweet darts,” he’d reminded me on a mocking sing-song.

I’d grinned. “Don’t be jealous, boss.”

Suddenly tense, Duo had hissed, “Jesus Christ. Don’t ever call me that.”

I’d nodded against his braided hair, my shoulders hunching and tone softening with apology. “OK. I won’t.”

Duo had relaxed into my half-embrace, finding the hand draped beneath his heart and settling his fingers between mine. “OK.”

I hadn’t been able to stop myself from leaning closer; forgiveness had never been this easy among my troupe.

Little by little, the molds for the synthetic stone come together, forming a network of dull gray plastic over the equally dull gray paneling of “ground.” Jamesson is as energetic as I’ve ever seen him, folding and unfolding and re-folding the church plans, pacing the area and counting off under his breath, wiping down the tools he’d rented for the day in preparation for easing out air bubbles and leveling off the liquid, light-weight pseudo-cement.

Someone from the recycle center is supposed to bring a mixer truck just after twelve o’clock.

Duo gives the last joint a solid thwack with the mallet and passes it to me. “Reverend,” he calls quietly just as the man moves past us on yet another round of double checking.

“Hm? Yes, J.D.? Have you found any irregularities?”

Duo tilts his head to the side. His smile is wry. “I guess you could say that.”

“What is it?” The man looks as eager as he is apprehensive at the prospect of last-minute problem solving.

“Folk in the res-den have been asking me about you.”

“ Asking you about me?”
Duo nods. “I’ve got history here, but no claims on my loyalty. If you’re willing to let me make the introductions, the sooner the better.”

Jamesson gives Duo a considering look. “I’ve thought about it and I think I can work with the situation you described. If I’m given a fair bit of help.”

“In that case,” Duo replies, glimpsing the approaching recycle center vehicle, “put together your list, Reverend. I’ll see what I can do.”

“You’re enjoying this,” I accuse Duo the next afternoon. The stone had been poured the day before and had set overnight. We’d broken off the molds this morning and piled up the shards of plastic for a return trip to the recycle center. Now Duo is studying the list that Jamesson had passed him and, using a pen that looks like it’s been gnawed on repeatedly, he’s scribbling some sort of illegible shorthand in the margins.

“It’s like math. Y’know, the story problems? If a shuttle leaves for Earth from L2 traveling at a constant velocity of twenty-five kilometers per second and some asshole chucks a cockroach into the outer, starboard engine, how long will the explosion burn before someone in the cabin screams and passes out?”

I stare at him.

He doesn’t seem to notice.

“Duo,” I call quietly, mindful of Jamesson’s presence at the makeshift drafting table he has set up.

“Hm?”

“Did G actually teach you anything useful?”

He snorts. “Hell, no. Mostly, he just injected me with all sorts of shit and sent me out on impossible training exercises to see if managed to not die. Howard was the one who gave me the training manual and wished me luck.”

I think he’s serious.

But speaking of… “He’d probably like to hear from you.”

“Who?”

“Howard.”

“Yeah? Well, if I’m gonna be hunting up another vid phone, is there anyone you need to check in with?”

“Cathy. Maybe Wufei.”

“Wufei?”

I frown in thought. “For some reason, he was convinced he’d be able to find you before I did. I never bothered to tell him he could call off the search.”

“Hah. You just wanna gloat.”

I don’t deny it.
More hushed, speedy scribbling follows. I turn my face up to the ceiling of the colony. I miss the feel of wind. Sunshine. A cloudy shadow passing overhead.

“I’m not a prize, Tro,” Duo suddenly says very quietly. I’m not the only one who’s mindful of Jamesson’s proximity.

I take in Duo’s dull, limp braid and wrinkled, musky clothes. “I’m well aware of what you aren’t, but you’re more than you think you are.”

He blinks at me.

I angle my head to get a good look at the mutilated handwriting on the sheet of plastic. “So how long will it take for someone in the cabin to scream and pass out?”

“Depends on the size of the cockroach.”

“Naturally.”

Today’s delivery from the recycle center includes metal support beams for the floor and wall panels. The panels themselves had been poured and molded to meet specifications. Building something on a colony requires a lot more planning and forethought than on Earth. Here, there will be no materials to measure and cut to size. Everything is prefabricated and ready for assembly.

That doesn’t mean it takes less time or manpower to get the job done, though.

We manage to unload the trucks and sort things into neat piles for reference. Duo and I lay the floor beams, using the crate of plastic wedges and rubber sealing strips to make sure everything is stable.

Duo approaches the reverend as the man is re-counting the number of floor panels intended for the ground floor. I hang back, close enough to eavesdrop but far enough away to give them a moment to confer. I don’t have any stake in these negotiations with the exception of ensuring Duo’s safety. I doubt I can add anything meaningful to the discussion, so I leave them to it.

“Once these walls go up, everyone is gonna see it,” Duo points out. “So now would be a real good time for you to meet the neighbors.”

The reverend lowers his clipboard. “How would you suggest I do that?”

“Well, it would be better for you to meet them on their turf as a gesture of good faith, but that doesn’t mean it ain’t gonna be dangerous.”

Jamesson stiffens.

“T.W. and I will be right by you from start to finish—”

I’m not the least bit bothered that Duo is volunteering me for this. Frankly, Duo had ended up in the middle of this situation because of my actions. Through no intention of his own, Duo is committed to setting up these negotiations. I owe it to him to back him up. I want to be there to back him up. So I will be.

Duo continues, “I’ll do what I can to help but, bottom line: you’ll be putting your life in our hands. T.W. and I know how to handle ourselves and we can protect you, but if you can’t trust us both, tell me now. You won’t insult either of us by refusing and I’ll try to figure out another way to get you what you need.”
“You know more about the way things work here than I do, and you know what the realistic goals are,” the reverend reminds him. “I trust you — both of you.” He glances my way even though I’m making a production out of cleaning my hands with a wipe. I don’t use the tap because the noise of splashing water might cause me to miss something important.

Duo nods. “OK. Then let’s find someplace private where we can talk. You need to have a good idea of what’s what.”

This happens in a generic family restaurant. It’s still a little early for dinner, so we have our choice of seats. The corner booth furthest from both the restrooms and kitchen doors does nicely.

We place our orders and Duo dives into the particulars, drawing a map of the res-den with his pock-marked pen onto the back of Jamesson’s list. As he explains about the main territories, my suspicions regarding Sunday night’s roundabout walk and brief exchanges with scouts are confirmed. Duo had been doing more than just touching base with the leadership of each gang; he’d been feeling out the fuzzy edges of territory borders.

He outlines Jebb's territory, which, touching on the import docks as it does, puts his people in position to make sure that if a shipment of supplies meant for the church goes missing it’ll be because the gang has confiscated it before the colony police can get their hands on it. The reverend will have to pay a “ransom” for the items to finish their journey.

“That’s extortion,” Jamesson observes with more surprise than affront.

“It’s business,” Duo insists. “The money won’t just be going into his pocket. Jebb’s got to look after his people and he’s got to give the cops an incentive not to investigate the missing shipments. The gangs don’t want to see you fail, OK? In Jebb’s case, he’s protecting you from unwanted attention. That’s worth paying for.”

Jamesson nods on a weary sigh. “The head church has asked what I’ll need by way of supplies. I suppose I should keep those to a minimum.”

“Just make sure you have spending money. Import fees are real high here. It might be cheaper for you if Jebb’s people get to your shipment before customs does. As for the supplies themselves, send for the usual when dealing with areas of civil unrest: first aid, nutritional food, water filters, linens. I figure you can make do with Allie bags—”

“Alliance surplus sleeping bags,” I explain, patting my camp roll and leaning forward so that Duo can see the approach of the waiter.

“Alliance surplus sleeping bags,” I explain, patting my camp roll and leaning forward so that Duo can see the approach of the waiter.

“Yup, plenty of those still around,” he agrees, giving the waiter a vacuous grin and a nod as his plate of stir-fried, space-frozen meat and vegetables clunks down in front of him. I’d ordered the same. Jamesson had opted for a much pricier cheese pasta dish with a baked sweet potato and somewhat fresh green salad. All of which would have been imported and transported through space in a container kept at a temperature above freezing. That kind of cargo care costs money. Money that neither Duo nor I are keen to waste when an equally filling and nutritious option is available.

Duo pokes at a branch of broccoli in sauce and draws a breath to speak.

“Eat while it’s hot,” I murmur.

He checks his watch. Yes, we still have time before dark.

Duo eats quickly, making some effort to stretch the meal out but keeping an eye on the clock. I’m about halfway through mine when he pops the last bite in his mouth and continues his lecture.
“Once I set this up,” Duo warns, “there’ll be no backing out without leaving the colony for good. Are you sure this is what you wanna do, Reverend?”

The man picks his way through the rest of his salad before answering. “If this is the best way to help the people who need it the most, then I am very sure. I understand that I’ll be working in moral and legal gray areas, but it’s for a good cause. That’s why I came here: to do some good.”

“Good,” Duo either approves or repeats. It unsettles me that I can’t tell which from the tone of his voice. I glance his way, but his face tells me nothing. His eyes are hard. Flat. I’m not sure what that means.

“Folk in the res-den respect confidence and expect pride. It might go against the grain for you, but you gotta show the second. Without pride, you’ll look like a sad, sorry fook, and no one’s gonna have your back outta pity.”

Jamesson gives me and then Duo a self-depreciating half smile. “I was in drama club in my school days, so—”

“Stop right there,” I interject. “Head up. Shoulders back. Say it like your life depends on it.”

“But with charm,” Duo adds. The sly, sidelong look he shifts my way brims with equal parts humor and appreciation.

“As I was saying,” the reverend reiterates, adjusting his tone and posture as we’d advised, “I was given the lead in several productions during my school days.”

I nod once.

“Smile,” Duo orders.

The reverend manages a genuine grin.

“Not bad. I know humility is supposed to be a virtue, but that kind of thing is tantamount to shooting yourself in the foot here.”

Jamesson accepts the critique with a happy nod.

Duo cautions, “At the same time, though, you gotta look past the posturing and give the gangs what they need without it being charity. Everything’s a transaction. Or, at least, it had better look like one. Help the leaders save face and you’ll have a network of allies you can count on.”

“Guys like Monch?” I inquire softly, the tone of my voice carefully pitched so that the reverend isn’t aware that I’m raising an issue that could be a problem.

Duo doesn’t back away from addressing it. “Monch. Runs a gang further up the slope. He’s from fac-tric — the factory district — and guys like him will only ever look out for number one. I don’t know what he promises his people to keep them loyal, but the gangs we’ll be dealing with this evening don’t work that way.”

He waits until the returning waiter clears our dishes, asks for our dessert orders, and leaves the bill. He does not offer to refill our water glasses. A clear hint that it’s time for us to leave the establishment.

We gather our things and go. The three of us are strolling up Main Street toward the space port before Duo finishes his explanation. Glancing toward the gray clutter of grimy misery on the
opposite side of the colony, he wraps up the lesson: “Adults who get kicked out of the fac-tric either find work in the shops, wander downtown begging, or take their chances in the res-den. For them, it’s survival of the fittest. You can’t expect any guarantees from them.”

Nodding toward the res-den, Duo contrasts, “But for the gangs that are on your side, it’s one-for-all and all-for-one. Leaders are supported by a majority and they don’t stay in charge if they don’t get results.”

Duo turns down a lamp-lit side street, gesturing to the lights and brusquely informing Jamesson, “Safeline. Stick to the streets with lights or you’ll find yourself in an awkward situation.”

“For the gang, too,” I hear myself contribute. “If you cut through the alleys and they let you go without taking a pound of flesh, it could get them in a tough spot with the police, who are supposed to get a cut from the activities that happen on darkened streets.”

Duo’s hand brushes mine. “Right. You’ll probably get away with it once or twice, but if you make a habit of it, things are gonna get real uncomfortable.”

The reverend nods thoughtfully. “I see what you mean. The situation you proposed with Jebb’s people and incoming shipments for the church… it’s rather Machiavellian, isn’t it?”

I wouldn’t go quite that far. “The art of war, at the very least.”

Duo snickers. “Just make sure you look dumb and clueless if anyone — especially any generous patrons of the church — start asking how you manage to keep things running.”

“That might be an appropriate time for humility,” I note.

“I can’t thank either of you enough for doing this. I—”

I put a hand on his shoulder and shake my head.

Duo concurs, “Thank us after all the introductions are made, Reverend. Like any good show…”

Duo cues me with a look. I smirk. “Hold your applause until the end.”

Jamesson chuckles. The moment of humor is brief but necessary. For all of us.

We start walking again, crossing an intersection and entering neighborhoods with barred windows and metal doors. As Jamesson studies the poles marching along the sidewalk, doing his best not to gawp at the increasing paranoia which fades to utter poverty, Duo slips from between me and the reverend to take his place at the man’s opposite flank.

It doesn’t take long for a figure I recognize as Jebb’s lieutenant to approach from an unlit lane between two sagging houses.

“Yo, fook,” he calls out. I stay close to Jamesson and let Duo take point. Even without the zipline, I feel edgy. Ill-at-ease. Ah, so this is what unease feels like. I think I understand the difference now.

“Heaps,” Duo answers and I’m not sure if the word is meant to be a response or if that’s what the man calls himself. Probably the latter. “Jebb in a space? Won’t wire where we won’t wrench.”

Heaps gives Duo a nod. “He’s jacking a flap. Roam through.”

As the scout turns to lead the way, Jamesson looks to me for reassurance. Knowing we’re being watched, I reply aloud when I would have simply shrugged, “I don’t understand all of it and, if he’d
been talking to me, I’d have asked for clarification or answered in a complete sentence.”

The reverend accepts this advice. Duo approves of my words with a nod. Heaps merely watches, a speculative gleam in his pale eyes. Perhaps he’s wondering how many sweet dreams darts it would take to knock me out. I’m fresh out of zipline, and I’m reasonably certain that Duo’s tolerance for foreign substances is higher than mine. He’d actually received attention from a scientist before he’d been allowed into a Gundam. I’d been a last minute replacement.

If it had taken Duo five seconds to succumb to a full dose of sweet dreams, then I won’t even know what hit me.

Heaps leads us along a winding route, past more faces than I’d ever seen on a given day in the residence. The introductions have already begun: the gang is getting a look at the reverend and the reverend is being given a chance to see just who he might be feeding or patching up or offering shelter to in the not-very-distant future.

Jebb’s place is a decommissioned subway line that runs from the space port to the Crest, where the wealthy reside. A thick layer of dust and grime covers the forgotten construction signs along the platform. I assume that a newer line is in operation elsewhere; the rich are no more eager to pass through the seedy underbelly of the colony now than when this facility had been operational.

Duo takes in his surroundings with a sweeping glance. From here, I can almost feel the air vibrating with questions. He doesn’t ask Heaps. Upon meeting Jebb, he doesn’t ask him, either.

“Reverend Jamesson, this is Jebb.”

The reverend offers his hand. Heaps steps in front of Jebb and refuses with a shake of his head.

After a moment of careful consideration, Jamesson holds up both hands, palms empty. Heaps steps back. Jebb and the reverend exchange words instead. Pleasantries.

Into the following moment of awkward silence, Duo intercedes, “The good fella here caught snap of flicked wants-and-what long Maxwell time. He’s jacking to squeeze out the Cresters. Mayhap you got him needful hatch.”

Jebb thinks this over. “I knock that iss. They def gob up what you got. We might hand in. Quote me a star.”

Despite the familiar turn of phrase — the blunt invitation to talk figures — I don’t relax my guard. Duo can’t afford to disrespect Jebb by being anything less than completely involved in the bargaining, which leaves me to watch not only Duo’s back but Jamesson’s and my own.

It’s not a difficult task, not this time, and a basic arrangement is reached within fifteen minutes. Following that, Jebb offers his hand to the reverend.

“Lock, Jamesson.”

“Lock, Jebb.”

Jebb also shakes Duo’s hand, though I can’t help but sense that it isn’t out of appreciation, but rather it’s a gesture of farewell. I make a note of it and keep my guard up.

Heaps nods for us to follow him topside. New faces watch us leave. Duo takes us back to Main Street before he checks the time. It’s still early yet.
“Whadaya guys say? You up for another round?”

“Yes,” Jamesson says. “Let’s get it all done today. Or as much as we can. I don’t want anyone thinking I’m giving special treatment.”

Duo grins, glances in my direction. I nod. We venture down another safeline. This one leads toward the old Alliance base and Retcher’s roamers. It’s Retcher himself who greets us.

“Yo, fook. Got you your boy-ya, didn’t I?”

Duo lunges forward and slams his fist right between the scout’s eyes with enough force to stun him.

Retcher stiffens. I watch the shadows, counting the lurking figures in the nearest alleyway.

Retcher takes a staggering step back, blinks, and grins. “Got your sport on. We might yet have us a house on fire.”

Duo smirks. “Go piss.”

The scout chuckles, his gaze moving from me to Jamesson.

Duo draws his attention back to himself, “Is Darl’s schedule stuck to the wall?”

“Who’s jacking a look?”

“The good fella.”

Retcher nods. “Right. I’ll scout you up.”

I recall an echo of those exact words when Duo and I had met up with Drege and he’d taken us to the meeting location through Pinky’s territory. If the turn of phrase means “lead the way” then Retcher manages it with flair. Flair that reminds me vaguely of the war-cry-screaming pilot of a black Gundam. Just like Pinky’s act — the harmless, bored kid smoking on the stoop — reminds me of a wide smile and dramatic hand gestures aboard Peace Million in the wake of a hard fight.

If Duo had stayed on this colony, would he be a gang leader himself now?

Does Darl wonder the same thing? There’s an edge to this meeting that hadn’t been there with Jebb, possibly because Darl suspects us of taking Jamesson to meet one of his rivals first or perhaps because there’s bad blood between him and Duo. It’s hard to tell from Duo’s body language; his mask is firmly in place as he facilitates the get-together and bartering.

Darl’s territory has a lot of unblocked maintenance tunnel access. Shutting off or damaging the water, power, and sewage lines to the church is definitely something the cops will consider if Jamesson’s success starts to cut into their profits.

Again, the transaction is short. Darl and the reverend shake on it.

We turn to leave and Darl calls softly, “Smile out, Duo.”

I glimpse the tightening in Duo’s expression as he lifts a hand and waves over his shoulder. “Knocked it, man. All-one to you and yours.”

“What did he mean?” Jamesson asks when we reach the nearest safeline. “‘Smile out?’ What is that?”
Duo shrugs and I know what I’m about to hear will be gross over-simplification. “It means ‘go with a smile.’”

“Should I be concerned if I hear it said again?”

“You’re all-one, Reverend. Safe and sound. If anyone tries to hassle you, you’ll have at least three gangs buzzing to protect their investment — you.”

Quietly, Jamesson checks, “And if someone says it to you?”

“Depends on who’s saying it.”

A shock of awareness explodes through me. Duo’s not safe here. Whatever celebrity status he’d enjoyed at the meeting on the site of the former Maxwell Church is gone. Somehow, the admiration Duo had commanded has been eclipsed by a very real threat.

Damn it. Figuring out Une’s ambitions for OZ hadn’t been this complicated.

One of Pinky’s scouts intercepts us before we can get to downtown, which is rumbling with the noise of a Tuesday evening rush hour. We meet up with Drege and have a chat with Pinky right out in the open on the front steps. He’s still smoking, lazing, smirking his skinny ass off. But his eyes are clear and the reverend treats him as a potential equal.

This deal is a bit more nuanced than the others. Given that res-den’s only “neutral territory” is a stone’s throw away from Pinky’s front door, it’s understandable that homeless kids will seek shelter here at some point.

Duo accuses, “I knock skin-hunting is def biz in the res-den, but the good fella here is jacking a few hands in. The scrap you pick up, he’ll take on.”

“How many spins are we talking?”

“Depends on the kitlets. They jack to sit tight, then that’s graft.”

Pinky’s eyes narrow. “Folk don’t pop outta the shiz here, man.”

With a jerk of his chin — a challenging gesture — Duo demands, “You got you this shit-and-what on your terms?”

Fury. For a moment, Pinky’s eyes brim with it. “I do now.”

Duo’s shoulders relax. He lifts his palms. “C’mon, man. You got the kitlets that.”

Something in the tone of Duo’s voice pulls together the nuance of his argument. At the restaurant, he’d told us that this would be one of the hardest deals to make because a lot of the runaway kids from the fac-tric end up seeking shelter at the church ruins, believing that the rumors they’ve heard of “neutral territory” equates to a safe haven. It doesn’t. It’s easy to see that this is how Pinky finds new recruits for his gang. If he turns them all over to Jamesson, he’ll lose that advantage.

I’d wondered how Duo would convince him, would offer him an agreement that would allow the leader to save face with his people. And here it is: Duo is playing on the fact that very few of the gang members had been allowed a choice. He’s appealing to the scared child that still exists in each of them. He’s asking them to use their hard-won power to make this world a little fairer by giving the next generation the choice that they themselves had been denied.
It’s a risky move. My trust in human nature is non-existent; I would have argued against this move if I’d known about it beforehand. But I have to believe that Duo knows what he’s doing.

And he does.

I sense a softening in Pinky’s glare, but Duo is only halfway to his goal. It’ll take a little more to get the full approval of the gang majority, without whose support Pinky will lose his status.

Pinky lifts the smoldering cigarette to his lips. Inhales. Exhales. Waits.

Duo braces his hands on his hips. “You knock where the ones that flush out will turn. You jacking for Monch to scoop them up or your folk to bring them in?”

A very good question: what is in the best interests of Pinky’s gang, that Monch benefit from selling homeless kids to slavers or that Pinky’s gang gain new members?

Pinky’s lips twitch. His eyes gleam with a shrewd light. “I knock it.” Turning to Jamesson, the young man’s grin widens. Turns deliriously disarming. “Yo, good fella. You jack the kitlets for a hand in? Yeah, I got you that. What you got me?”

I have to give Jamesson credit. The man doesn’t even flinch as Duo negotiates a price that won’t exhaust Jamesson’s funds and won’t insult Pinky’s generosity. This “good fella” — this man of God — could not have imagined that he would be participating in human trafficking when he’d endeavored to bring a little faith and hope to this colony.

What he seems to understand, however, is that even faith and hope comes with a price. In this place, that means creds.

At least he doesn’t despair until we’ve reached and left the bustle of Main Street and are making our way towards the site of the church. “Dear Heavenly Father. What have I done?”

“What you needed to,” I tell him, hoping to give Duo’s voice a rest. He’d started to sound hoarse at the conclusion of that last arrangement.

Jamesson whispers in abject misery, “The buying of children…!”

I deliver the cold, hard facts, “People here can’t afford to give away business opportunities for free. This helps both of you. You get kids who will work for you—”

“Especially if you explain that they owe you a debt,” Duo agrees quietly. “Fac-tric kids will expect something like this. You took them in. They owe you thirty-five creds of work. Pay them two creds a day minus food and board — it’s what their parents would have gotten. It’ll show them that you consider them capable. You treat them like they can think for themselves and a lot of them will. I’d be surprised if any of them wanna go back into the res-den after that.”

“I can find them homes,” the reverend volunteers optimistically. “Not here, necessarily, but…”

“Just be real clear and explain what the risks are before they take off into the res-den,” Duo continues. “They’ll be clean and looking good to slavers. Before they leave the church, make sure they’ve got a disguise and a means of defending themselves.”

“A disguise? You mean put them back in rags and cover them in filth?” Jamesson practically moans.

My jaw clenches. “It’s either that or scars.”
Duo startles, glancing my way. I give him a long look. He’d underestimated me again; it had been easy to see that Drege’s scars had come from fights, but Darl’s hadn’t been random enough or from the dull edge of cheap weapons. He hadn’t been able to do a thing about his eyes, though. Crystal blue eyes. Nearly the same shade as Quatre’s. The burns and jagged slashes of scar tissue might have covered a mediocre face — it had been impossible to tell — but with those eyes alone, an unmarked child would have fetched a good price.

Duo looks away. Swallows. “T.W.’s right. The fewer kids there are on the streets, the more desperate skin hunters will be. Scars and gang affiliation might be kinder than being sold as a rich pervert’s pet, but then again it might not. The kids’ve gotta know, though.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

For the second time today, I put a hand on Jamesson’s shoulder. I tell the crestfallen man, “That doesn’t make it worthless or pointless.” My gaze skitters helplessly toward Duo. “Sometimes the least you can do is more than enough.”

Duo watches me right back. His lips curve upward. “Amen, brother.”

Jamesson laughs, expelling his misery one short wheeze at a time.

We don’t ask if he’s still sure about this. He doesn’t beg for mercy and we don’t invite his capitulation.

The fourth and final meeting of the evening is anti-climactic. Morisa agrees to “hassle” the church just enough to make the cops think that their job is being done for them. In exchange, Morisa’s people will have ready access to basic first aid and more. Jamesson promises not to turn anyone away and the subtext has me imagining an arrangement in which the church is vandalized overnight and, the following day, a relatively new or unknown member of the gang will show up looking to work for food and, in exchange, will “hand in” on the repairs.

“And that settles it,” Duo concludes as we slow to a stop on the pavement outside the boarding house. He claps Jamesson on the back soundly, “Welcome to the colony, Reverend.”

“J.D.,” he begins, “T.W. I can’t thank you both enough.”

“We’ll see about that,” Duo retorts with a cocky grin. “We might need a favor come tomorrow.”

“What’s that?”

I resist the urge to glance at Duo; I also want to hear the answer.

“Nothing you won’t be able to manage. Have a good one! We’re raising the walls and roof bright and early!”

With that, Duo uses his shoulder and elbow to nudge me into motion. I have questions. So many questions. Every day I spend with Duo, I only come up with more. But I don’t regret the promise I’d made him. I won’t ask. That includes our destination for the night.

As we cram ourselves into my sleeping bag, Duo commandeering the zipper, he lets me pull him close. Relaxes into me. I give him my trust and he gives me his. We might never have negotiated it, but I think the arrangement is working out well for both of us. So far.
Jamesson’s deal with Pinky doesn’t mean he won’t take in kids who come to the church via different ways. As Duo says, everything needs to be couched in a transaction, so Jamesson needs to give each gang an example of what he’s willing to trade for. As a kind of baseline for future interactions.
Anger and Exile

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: language... um, I think that's about it. Some Duo angst, y'know, the "usual"


Music Rec: “Cradle And All” by Ani DiFranco

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... DUO ...

“Hey, J.D.!”

I lean over the edge of the roof and peer down. “Yeah, Jack?”

“We were all thinking about going out tonight to celebrate. You interested?”

Am I interested in celebrating two days of body-wrecking hard work by blowing too much money on warm, flat, overpriced beer? You bet your ass I am. Can’t shout that from a the top of church roof, though, so I tone it down: “Yeah, sounds awesome. You asked T.W. yet?”

“Naw, thought you’d do the honors.”

“Sure thing. We’ll get back to you after break.”

“Sounds good.”

I take a peek at my battered wristwatch before getting back to the sheet of synthetic roofing that I’m supposed to be working on. I squeeze the trigger of the drill until the buzz and whir manages to shove all thoughts of the streets beyond this small city block from my mind.

It’s hard to believe that just yesterday morning, I’d been staring down at the foundation of wanna-be stone and straining my brain trying to imagine any sort of appreciable progress by the end of the day. Heh. Shows what I know. The RC dudes had brought their game yesterday morning and a crane.

We’d had the beams up by lunch. Roofing panels had been lifted and strapped down for later distribution. The flooring for the second level over the office, restrooms, and storage rooms had gotten their awkward, bulky asses hoisted up and laid out. Second floor panels had been secured on every outer wall before four o’clock. We’d rocked the fuck outta yesterday.

Which had been a damn good thing because Trowa and I had needed a place to crash.

The good reverend had been shocked when I’d cashed in our collective favor for unfinished walls and a sketchy loft space, but he’d given in. Thank God.

Trowa and I had officially worn out our welcome in the res-den the day before.
Last night as the “sunlight” had faded and I’d considered waiting twenty minutes before trying to jump-lift-and-haul my ass and attached full-to-bursting stomach up into the loft, I’d thought fondly of the ranch-style house beside the broken street lamp. The two-story cockroach party with the siege-able attic. The maze of a quiet, suburban whorehouse that had been as pitch black as the long-gone customers’ lack of courage and vision. Even the ten-story office iceberg which was getting too close to completion for us to borrow anymore. Good times, good times.

But.

Life goes on.

It’d be nice if they sold road maps for it. That’s all I’m saying.

That’s where my head had been last night as I’d stood, blinking up at the loft, when Trowa had fucking leaped right up there, set his shit down, and then leaned over the edge to offer me a hand.

Jesus fucking Christ. This. Guy.

“Was that an acrobat show-off thing or are you really that eager to get your hands on me?” I’d sputtered, incredulous.

He’d given it a think before inquiring, “Why can’t it be both?”

God. I just—never fucking mind.

Out of spite, I’d made him haul me and my backpack and my Allie bag up to the ledge. He’d been careful not to shift the panels as they hadn’t been fixed down to the beams yet, but I’d give exactly zero fucks about falling. I’d stomped away from our collective nest and laid down on my back, hands tucked behind my head, and given a big fat go-piss to the unforgiving surface of the loose flooring pressing up into my overworked muscles.

I’d stared up at the twinkling “stars.”

Trowa hadn’t asked.

I hadn’t spoken.

I’d joined him in our latest in an impressive series of makeshift bunks only when I’d heard his teeth chatter. He’d probably been faking though, because there hadn’t been a damn thing wrong with his body temperature when he’d pulled me in tight.

At least I’d gotten command of the zipper-exit again.

And I’d gotten to spend several oh so enjoyable hours lying wide awake and thinking-and-then-unthinking thoughts about TV remote control possession and how that’s when you know a thing between two people is Serious.

Maybe we are.

Maybe we could be.

Maybe I should ask.

God damn it why the fuck am I thinking about impossible shit like this instead of working and how many frickin’ times have I tested the tensile strength of the bolts on this stupid decoratively tiled panel?
Not even gonna check my watch and throw together a guesstimate on that.

What feels like a furious fifteen minutes later, the only way any one of these plastic roof bits is gonna be moving is if the place gets blasted by something that goes *boom!* And since I won’t be hanging around much longer, that pretty much guarantees the building’s lasting legacy.

I stomp my way over to the edge of the roof and swing down the extension ladder. The reverend scrambles to spot for me as it rattles and dances with my weight, but I’m four rungs away the ground by the time he gets a grip on it. The man draws a breath, probably to clue me in on how fucking around with heights is dangerous.

Well, yeah. That’s why I’d done it.

“Roof ain’t blowing off,” I announce like a brainless twit.

Ron snorts out a laugh. “Not much chance of that on this colony.”

“It’s a conspiracy,” Matt insists between buzzes of his own battery-powered drill. “My dad and I made this kite when I was seven or eight and I’ve never been able to fly it.”

Jack spins around, lifting an invisible violin to his shoulder. He screws his eyes shut and prompts, “Hey, Matt, know what this is?”

“You giving your imaginary blowup doll a back rub?” Ron suggests.

Matt laughs hard. Just like that, his regrets are banished back to where they came from. Lucky bastard.

He says, “If that’s what you think a back rub looks like, you and I have gotta have a talk, buddy.”


I pass Ron the drill I’d been using — hell, I know a thing or what about your average arms race and get my ass outta there before I end up pulled into the debate. I’m pretty sure Trowa’s still working on the nave wall, so I meander around the building in that direction.

I stop just short of the corner to carefully assess the situation. This is one habit from the war and my training that will never become obsolete. Especially when thumbs, knuckles, and drill bits are at stake. A brief survey of the area confirms that I’m not barging in on any delicate operations so I commence with my final approach.

“Want a hand with that?” I gesture toward the panel Trowa is leaning on in order to hold it in place and I give the power drill in his hand a glance, brows arched in question.

I’m already moving before he can nod. When he doesn’t offer me the drill, I dutifully assume the position, bracing my feet shoulder-width apart and flattening my palms against the slab, pressing it to the studs… and trying not to think too hard about Trowa’s taller body crowding me. Shoulders bump. A shadow over me. Enviably long arms reaching over my head. OK, that right there had been a hip against my ass cheek, damn it.

Still not thinking about it.

“You feel like taking a break after you’re through here?” I stupidly suggest just so I can sit next to him and not think about his knee bumping mine or the last jug of refiltered water that we’re probably gonna be sharing because we’re guys and it’s too much of a pain in the ass to go all the way around
the building to refill them at the spigot where Jamesson hooks up the filter system every morning without fail.

Trowa says, “Sure.”

Great. Cool. And as I stand here basically being a human wedge, there’s nothing stopping me from flashing back to the one thing I really don’t want to think about: Trowa’s sleepy sigh as he’d burrowed closer to me this morning and breathed my name.

Of all the people in the universe to share a sleeping bag with.

Why am I so pissed off about this, anyway?

The hell if I know.

“Ready?”

The sound of Trowa’s voice knocks me out of my own head. I cover my surprise with a nod and a grin that feels as fake as the rest of this shithole colony before stepping away from the wall. I stroll through the “lawn” following the path presenting the fewest number of ankle-twisting and shin-striking obstacles. Building supplies: so many little-known uses, right?

I plop down on the dusty tailgate of Jack’s truck with a slice of cold quiche and a pasty of freeze-dried mystery meat. It turns out that the cafe from Sunday’s coffee run opens at a sickeningly ambitious six o’clock in the morning. The food is even better then. Once that realization had happened, so had takeout.

Though I purposefully leave plenty of room for Trowa to work with, he perches at my side, collects his own servings of cafe offerings, and his knee bumps mine right on cue.

Not gonna think about it.

Around a mouthful of fried bread, stringy and cold jerky-esque filling, and what I sincerely hope are slices of mushrooms, I force myself to cut through the silence. “Hey, the guys are going out tonight since I guess finishing the roof and four walls is the kind of thing that really turns their crank. You wanna go?”

“They invited us?”

“Naw,” I snark, “it’s been a while since I embarrassed myself in public. I figure this colony’s ready for a reminder.”

Trowa’s silence speaks for him.

Right. I know I’m being an asshole, OK? I know.

I sigh and let shame bow my head. “Yes, Jack invited us. You interested?”

“Sure.”

“OK.”

Trowa finishes his pasty and reaches for the water bottle. I know I shouldn’t — I know I should be keeping my attention aimed straight ahead — but I find myself watching the line of Trowa’s throat as he leans back and gulps down his share of the water.
“Want to talk about it?”

I come back to myself with a start. Shit. Had I just zoned out watching him chug down half our damn water supply? I must have because Trowa’s just now snapping the cap back on the bottle and reaching for the quiche. Like me, he probably hopes it’ll be an improvement over the pasty. End on a high note and all.

“Uh, talk about what?” I almost wish I could bitch about his water consumption, but one of the recent perks of working for the reverend is unlimited refills of refiltered water.

“What’s on your mind.”

I look away as Trowa turns in my direction. Knee rubbing mine. “Um, no. Not really.”

“All right.”

I lift the last edible nibble of my pasty, sigh, and lower it again. “Trowa…”

“Yes?”

“I will tell you, OK? Just… later.”

“Can I be concerned?”

That question. How do I answer it? I fidget. I have no idea how to avoid lying to him without telling him everything. “On a scale of one to ten? I’d give it a four.”

Trowa studies my profile for a long moment. “What would I give it?”

“Somewhere between lion bowel distress and no safety net for the high wire?”

He nods sagely. “You dropped this quiche on the ground and weren’t going to tell me, were you?”

Oh, my God. This guy. I huff out a sound that is not a giggle, damn it. More of a spastic chuckle. With a rueful shake my head, I admit, “I don’t get you sometimes, man.”

“Sometimes I don’t get me, either.”

When he offers me a small smile, my mouth curves upward as well. I feel some of the weight trickle from my shoulders. “That’s a bad sign, buddy.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Ah-hah! But do you listen?”

“Hm? What’s that?”

My grin widens. “Eh, go find some fish turds to vacuum.”

Trowa snorts very quietly.

“So I can tell Jack to expect us?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”
“J.D.?”

“What?”

“The quiche is pretty good.” He glances my way and smirks. “Too bad I dropped yours on the ground earlier.”

I shove him off the tailgate. He stumbles forward, **laughing.**

Holy hell. Trowa Barton can laugh.

Across the site, the reverend stops talking mid sentence. Jack, Ron, and Matt each poke their head around the corner, wide-eyed with wonderment.

Ignoring them and my pounding heart, I wait for him to wind down before I loudly retort, “I don’t know what’s more disturbing.”

Tro leans a hand on the tailgate and beams. “What’s that?”

“A lion with bowel distress or a missing high wire safety net: I still got no clue which one you think is worse.”

“The lion,” he un-mystifies me. “Definitely the lion.”

“Yeah?” I give the quiche a thorough inspection. “OK. I can live with that.”

Tro’s body jerks and his head snaps up. I replay my words just as he whispers intently, smile gone, “Yes. You can.”

“I…” I swallow.

He searches my face. I try to bottle up my fears and disappointments and failures, but I think he sees every last one of them. “Later,” he agrees and picks up the water jug. Holds it out to me. Waits for me to finish it.

He scoops up the empty jug by my hip and accepts the one that I drain. Our fingers brush. Without a word, he heads for the water spigot. Yup, that’s Tro all over, being the bigger man, I mean.

I nom through my quiche, which looks fine, so I’m pretty sure he’d been yanking my chain about dropping it. Even if he hadn’t, it’s cool. I’ve eaten worse and lived to tell the tale.

Quitting time comes just as we get the doors hinged up. We throw the tools and ladder in the covered back of Jack’s truck. Windows will be happening tomorrow. Stairs. Wiring. Plumbing. Shit like that.

For now, though, Tro and I wash up, and grab our shit. Jack gives the reverend a ride to the boarding house. Matt and Ron lead a worryingly enthusiastic march toward downtown.

“I know a great place. You guys are gonna love it,” Ron brashly predicts.

“Place a wager on it?” I push with a hustler’s grin.

The wager doesn’t happen but another round of “truth and drink” seems to be on the agenda. I sip at my reusable plastic cup of flat, warm, overpriced beer and smirk as a very inebriated Matt shares his pain with the rest of us.
“So she was all like, ‘Let’s find someplace where we can be alone, Bobby.’”

“But your name’s Matt!”

“Yeah, I caught that, too,” Matt says, looking suspicious.

Jack shakes his head and pours himself another beer. “Man, what a mood-killer.”

“Well, now, that depends on how much you’ve had to drink.”

“Yeah, after number five or six, ‘Bobby’ starts to sound an awful lot like ‘Matt.’”

“Is that the voice of experience, there, Ron?”

“I was speaking hypothetically,” Ron protests with just the right amount of indignation.

“Uh-huh. Suuuure.”

Matt takes another swallow of beer and nudges the guy on his left, who happens to be me. “Your turn, Duo. Bad date story.”

“Bad date story,” I repeat, my face heating up. I survey my audience and fiddle with my plastic tumbler of last week’s beer, working the innocent angle. “Uh, well...”

I shift my gaze toward Trowa. The one and only bad date story — the only date story, period — I’ve got had been the time Hilde had dragged me across the damn colony to go to the circus and, really, she’d gotten the worse end of the deal.

Or maybe I had. The moment I’d realized Trowa hadn’t known me—God. That had—that had hurt. A whole fucking lot more than it should have.

But OK, honestly, the real winner of the jackpot of misery had been Trowa. There had been no way I could have just left him behind in his new life like Cathy had demanded. The guy had still been using his war moniker, for fuck’s sake. And damn it all if I hadn’t just worn out my welcome on that colony.

That’s one thing I’m most definitely oh so spectacular at.

Hearing that the Winner-family-run satellite had been hiring mobile suit workers — realizing that Quatre had come back to outer space — had been really amazingly good timing. Quatre would keep an eye on Trowa; he’d be watching his back when rebels or OZ or whoever the hell else who wanted a piece of him came calling. I mean, it had pretty much been a sure thing. On both counts.

To this day, I’m still not sure if Quatre had led his own enemies to that colony, or if he’d just pointed Trowa’s in the right direction. At this point, it hardly matters, I guess.

Right. Why don’t I tell that lovely tale in lieu of some dumb date deal?

Jesus. C’mon, Tro. Back me up already!

I try to cue him, but he remains stubbornly silent. And, is that a sparkle I see in those green eyes? No way. Can’t be. I tear my gaze away, regroup, and do my damnedest to look triumphant. “I don’t have any bad date stories.”

It’s true. The date had been Hilde’s doing. So the shit-tasticness of it is hers to tell. I’m pretty sure that logic works.
The guys at the scratched and cigarette-singed table roar with disbelief.

“Guys, guys, I’m just a young’un! An’ I’m broke! No opportunity for bad dates, here!”

“Not yet,” Ron says with a smirk.

I roll my eyes and damn Trowa in silence. He’s gonna get his for daring to look freakin’ amused by all this. Jesus. I’m probably as red as a docking siren light. The guy has a seriously sick sense of humor. Why do I put up with him? Clearly, I’m just as fucked up as he is. Maybe more so.

“How about you, Trowa?”

Very quietly, Trowa says, “I don’t date.”

Another roar from the guys promptly follows that little bomb.

“How about you, Trowa?”

Trowa’s face barely changes expression but he somehow manages to transmit a look that clearly says, And you would know that how?

I shake my head as the rest of the crew exclaims over Trowa’s obvious lack of interest in chasing anything in a skirt. Or a pair of tight blue jeans. Or some cute, little shorts. Or what-have-you. These dudes are hardly particular.

I sip my beer and wish Trowa would look just a little bit awkward, but nothing doing. The guy’s totally cool, completely relaxed.

If I weren’t pretty sure that I liked him, it would have been way too easy to hate him.

Just when Jack, Matt, and Ron have started to dish out loads of dating advice they feel will be immensely helpful to us in the near future, the karaoke machine starts up at the far end of the bar and a young woman, a brunette in a pair of those aforementioned sexy short shorts, starts singing along with an old colony mining song. The RC crew’s attention is immediately diverted as they cheer for the lady on the stage.

“Hey, she’s somethin’ else, eh, Duo?” Matt says. With a knowing twinkle in his eye, he advises, “If you cheer for her, you’ll probably be able to get at least one dance...”

I cough into my beer. “Uh, I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks.” I chance a glance at Trowa who is grinning behind his unruly hair. “Yeah, yeah, yuck it up, you sick little man,” I grumble under the music.

Doesn’t matter though. If Trowa’s chuckle is anything to go by, he can read lips at least as well as I can.

Before the pitcher of beer in the center of the table has emptied, we find ourselves holding down the fort as the guys circulate through the bar, chatting it up with attractive women.

“Well, that’s my cue,” I announce, tucking a few bills under the pitcher on the table.

Trowa does likewise and we slip out the door without incident. As we head down the lamp-lit street, I just gotta say, “We work with some seriously—those guys are—”

“Walking hormones?” Trowa suggests.
I laugh. “Don’t you know it, man! I mean, I’m not about to ruin anybody’s fun and if that’s what
guns your engine then more power to you, but...”

“It seems ridiculous. After what we’ve been through.” Again, Trowa finishes my thought with
creepy accuracy.

“Um, yeah.” I look his way. “How’d you—?”

Trowa gives me the look. The one that says, How the hell do you think I know?

“Right. Never mind. I’m just glad we got out of there before they got any bright ideas about setting
us up with anyone.” I scan the street, the sidewalk, the shuttered store fronts.

“Never would have happened,” Trowa replies, our gazes meeting in the reflective surface of a barred
window.

I have no comment on that except to keep on walking. We head back to the church by way of the
safelines. We’re watched with even more intensity tonight than ever before. Trowa notices. His
hand drifts closer to his knife. He angles his Allie bag across his back, reducing the amount of

Jamesson had entrusted me with the keys before we’d parted ways. I let us in and lock up in our
wake. The lack of stairs means Trowa has a second chance to impress the hell out of me. And, in a
way, he does. He hands me his duffel and Allie bags before making the jump easily, clutching the
edge of the loft and pulling himself up. A seemingly low-key approach that relies more on strength
than momentum.

So, yeah. I’m impressed. I hand up his things and mine. I decide to try to make the same jump, but
when I give it a shot, my fingers don’t quite reach the edge of the now-stable flooring. Damn it.

Trowa crouches down, extends his arms, says, “Again.”

I jump, his fingers clamp around my wrists as he leans back and I pull myself up. The toes of my
boots bump his. He widens his stance to make room and I’m balanced on the balls of my feet, my
heels hanging over the precipice at my back. Trowa’s grip on my wrists is constant, but he doesn’t
back up or pull me forward. He waits. I guess this is his version of asking if we’re OK. If I’m
ready to lean on him or if I need him to back off.

I sway toward him and he guides my arms around his waist. He shuffles backward a pace and I
follow. My forehead descends to his shoulder. His jaw leans against my ear.

Not having the slightest idea how to say all the shit that’s still a total cluster fuck in my head, I invite,
“Ask me something, Tro.”

“No whiskey tonight?”

“Nah. I wouldn’t do that to you a second time.”

“Hm. What a pal.”

“No really,” I sigh out. I move away out of obligation than any real need for personal space.
Trowa’s hands glide up my arms lightly, an invitation to stay if I want. Fuck it—I do want.

“After the church is done, we gotta leave,” I blurt out, not having come up with a better way to
untangle my thoughts before I’d run out of patience with myself.
Trowa considers that. And more than that. “Things changed after you made the introductions.”

“Yes. They did. Before that, being who I am, I had a little clout. And, being without a gang-affiliation, that made me the go-between. The gangs can’t talk to each other directly — civilly — and save face with their folk, you know?”

He nods. “Is Jamesson going to be all right?”

“He should be. He’s got strong allies who have a vested interest in his success here.”

“We don’t,” Trowa summarizes.

“Nope, we surely don’t. Right now, since we’re helping Jamesson with the construction, we’re tolerated. That’s why no one has tried to kill us in our sleep here inside the church.”

His fingers tighten around my shoulders. “It’s too late for us to choose a gang.”

I nod. I confirm, “We know too much. They can’t trust us not to be ‘persuaded’ to reveal the secure locations we’ve seen in their territory or set up an ambush in the guise of a meeting.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what, man?”

He gives me a moment to figure it out for myself before he murmurs, “You weren’t thinking about sticking around? Giving the reverend a hand with the orphans or the clinic?”

God damn it. “I was. I would have.” I close my eyes. My hands fist. I bite out, “It makes no fucking sense for me to be angry about this.”

“Why not?”

Shoving myself out of Trowa’s arms, I throw my hands in the air. “For the love of—!” I turn around. I can’t face both him and myself. “What does it even matter, anyway?”

“It matters. This place and these people matter to you. You went to war for them. You fought for anyone and everyone just like them.”

“You’re damn right I did! And I wasn’t gonna do it a second time until—” Until Trowa had told Pinky who I was and I’d gotten sucked back in to this world.

I stop. Drag in a deep breath.

“Do you blame me?”

I shake my head. “No. It’s not your fault I give a damn.”

“It’s not your fault you can’t end this on your own terms.”

“Yeah, well. Not a big fan of feeling… used.”

Trowa’s hands are warm on my locked-up shoulders. “Maybe this was Pinky’s plan all along.”

Huh. “Maybe it was.” As Father Maxwell’s only adopted son and the last of the kids taken in by the church, yeah, I could have worked with that. If I’d wanted to. Moot point now.
Trowa doesn’t encourage me to think of a time when I’ll be able to come back here. A week ago, I would have happily given this hellhole my best middle-finger salute, but now… I sigh. Some part of me will always be tied to this place. Some part of me will always wonder what I could have done differently, how I could have made a difference.

I don’t expect I’ll have that chance now. Setting foot on this colony before the current gang leaders have bought the shuttle to the sun will be a death sentence. Waiting until the coast is clear will mean starting over; the new generation won’t give a damn about who I am. I don’t know if I can handle that fight.

God damn it but I hate the thought of abandoning the kids here. Solo had trusted me to look after the little ones. I’m letting him down. Letting them all down. Reneging on my promise.

“Duo?”

“It’s supposed to be my job to fix this.” I speak so quietly that I almost don’t hear myself.

That doesn’t seem to be a problem for Trowa, though. “Jamesson has a good chance of rebuilding because of your help. You know better than I do how many lives he’ll change for the better.”

I huff. “It’s not finished.”

“Will it ever be? Maybe that’s why you didn’t want to get involved in the first place, J.D.”

Yeah, he has a point. “It’s OK, Tro. I know we gotta go sooner rather than later. You don’t have to convince me.”

There’s a long pause before Trowa reminds me, “I don’t say what I don’t mean.”

That is true. If I know anything about Trowa Barton, it’s that he doesn’t fuck around with lip service. Whatever he does or says, it’s with the aim of getting results.

He concludes gently, “It’s out of your hands now.”

Right again. I suck in a deep breath. Let it out. Try to let it go.

There’s nothing I can do here that won’t lead to death: my own or that of the folk who stand with me on this colony. My part in this fight is done. I have to move on. I can’t let this be another regret. I’ve got more than my share of those already.

I nod and, with a deliberate and very deep breath, I say a silent farewell to the me who might have stubbornly stayed and fought on.

“Yeah. OK. It’s done. We’ll squeeze out before the both of us smile out.”

“Smile out,” he muses softly, clearly remembering Darl’s warning. “Go down fighting?”

“Make a last stand, yeah.”

Another pause. Somehow I’m not surprised when he says lightly, “I can’t say I’ve ever smiled in the face of death.”

“Dude, I hate to burst your fantasy bubble there, but you smile at me all the damn time.”

He chuckles. “You haven’t killed me yet.”
No, not yet.

I shiver.

He pulls me closer.

I press my face against his wrinkled, smelly shirt to hide from the encroaching darkness. I draw a breath, scramble for words, but it’s all I can do just to keep breathing. But hey, it’s all good. Trowa talks for me.

With one arm around me, he unfurls our Allie bags. He loops my arms around his shoulders as he kneels to unlace our boots. I let him sit me down. Tug off my socks. Sanitize my feet.

Jesus. This guy.

He’s amazing. I’d nominate him for sainthood if he were a little more Catholic.

But it’s clear that Trowa Barton — Tro — is no saint and he doesn’t wanna be. He cleans his hands and mine. Wipes down my face and his. “Duo,” he breathes, words still coming in an endless stream that carries me gently past dark shores. “You’re safe. I’ve got your back.”

I know he does. It’s entirely possible that I’ve always known.

Chapter End Notes

Duo’s date (or friendly outing) with Hilde at the circus is particularly hilarious for me. Duo looks so bored until this young clown shows up, does a flip in the air, lands on the back of a lion, and rides around the ring. I love that Duo’s interest is piqued BEFORE he gets a close enough look at the clown’s face to recognize him as “that guy…!” Yes, Duo, the sexy stud muffin is also That Guy. Instant attraction and sizzling chemistry at its finest right there.
“Is it just me or is the coffee actually starting to taste decent there?” Duo asks as we leave the cafe. We’d left our sleeping bags at the church and each of us has looped the handles of a takeout bag containing our lunches over our wrists. It’s going to be another long day.

As we meander toward the market to do an obligatory load of laundry before eight o’clock, I consider the query Duo had posited.

The cafe staff has gotten used to us showing up less than two minutes after they open, so it’s possible that ours are the first and freshest cups of coffee served in the establishment over the course of any given day, but Duo isn’t looking for me to agree with him. Not after his semi-catatonic breakdown last night. He’s looking for a distraction.

I tilt my head to the side as if I’m giving the question serious consideration. “Or maybe the coffee has finally deadened the nerve endings in your tongue.”

“Not a very scientific hypothesis, buddy. I’ve got no way of confirming or denying that.”

I can think of one. Except that I’ve been drinking the same swill, so if his tongue has been radically affected, then so has mine. It wouldn’t be an unbiased investigation, but it would be someplace to start.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” I quote, which earns me a surprisingly nostalgic smile. The soft, wistful expression on his face both puzzles and delights me and I have to shove my hands in my jeans pockets lest I try to chase after that look by brushing my fingertips across his lips.

I’ve never had a problem keeping my distance from others before, but every time I lecture myself on giving Duo his space, I’m drawn back in. Why is that?

“Tro? You OK, man?”

“Yes. Fine.”

“You looked like you were off on Earth somewhere.”

I answer Duo’s oddly confrontational remark with a shake of my head. “Not on Earth,” I assure
him, easily addressing the implied question: I had not been missing my old life – I’d been wondering about this one.


Does Duo think I’m planning on taking off? But hadn’t I told him that I’d stay as long as he needed me to? Doesn’t he believe me?

Although, why would he? He’s well aware that I have no compunction against lying.

Well. I’m not going anywhere. Maybe, if I show him that truth, one day, he’ll believe me. He’ll believe in me.

Is that what I want from him? Yes. Absolutely and without a doubt. But it’s not all that I want from him.

I blink, shocked at myself.

“A will and a way,” Duo repeats and his low, flat tone is like a signal flare fizzling out in the night sky. A call for help or a warning. Hazardous territory ahead.

I catch the flicker of pain as it tightens his expression. I pursue, “Is that wrong?”

Duo bites his lip. “You could say that. Most of my life has consisted of the wrong will and the wrong way.” He sucks in his next words, refusing to air out his soul. “Um. Sorry, Tro. Didn’t mean to bring down our caffeine high with that.”

I ignore his apology, thirsting for one more glimpse into his mind, his motivations, his fears. “What was wrong about it?”

Slouching further into both layers of his shirts, Duo steps onto the sidewalk and replies, “What wasn’t? Name one action I’ve taken that had pure intentions.”

“You bought me coffee last Sunday morning.”

He laughs out loud. If there had been any pigeons within earshot, they would have startled and taken flight. “Well, I guess a selfish, grudge-hoarding asshole like me has got to start somewhere.”

That can’t be how he sees himself. Can it? “No, that’s—”

“Never gonna be enough to fix any of my mistakes. That doesn’t stop me from thinking about it, though, y’know. What if I’d hesitated? I mean, when I was in that brig and here comes this Alliance officer looking to piss me off—I turned around to let Death get a good look at him through my eyes and I saw... I dunno.” His jaw clenches. He shakes his head in frustration. “I saw something. And it kinda freaked me out. I dunno if I was just seeing his surprise or if I was actually remembering...”

Despite the way his voice trails off, I know he’s not finished yet, so I don’t try to think of anything to say.

A moment later, he draws in a breath and charges onward, “I didn’t stick around to find out. I just ran.”

Duo shuffles to a halt and clenches his fists. The market is in sight. The gate is open, but Duo makes no move to leave the sidewalk. “Things could have ended differently. Couldn’t’ve they?”

I shift closer. I hover. I offer my presence, unsure if Duo wants my arms around him out here. It’s
still early, but traffic is picking up back on Main Street. People will see this. Him and me. Us.

Duo hauls in a deep breath and looks up. “All he wanted was one more chance, Tro.”

To hell with it.

I pull my right hand from my pocket and curl my arm around Duo’s shoulders. A brief tug is all it takes and then Duo’s forehead is pressed against my neck. I have my answer: I’d made the right decision in reaching for him.

“And that’s maybe not even the worst of it,” Duo continues, voice muffled. “It was a given that I was all on my own, alone. I had to take care of myself ‘cause nobody was gonna be there to have my back. Nobody wanted me. Nobody had ever wanted me, but I was gonna prove it to the whole world that I was somebody. I was gonna make them see what a mistake they’d made in underestimating me.”

A shuddering breath leaves Duo’s body. “The rage kept me going, kept me strong, kept me rolling out of bed in the morning and running faster and laughing louder. And now... now when I reach for it, it’s just – it’s there but it’s so cold and sharp.”

One of Duo’s hands curls around my shoulder from behind and his grip is painfully tight. “I was wanted,” he tells me, dawning realization and awe raising his tone an octave as he’s caught up in a sudden paradigm shift. “I was.”

I shake my head — Duo’s use of past tense is wrong, so very wrong — but he’s pulling away and talking again, so I say nothing.

“When I was looking back at that base—the detonator was in my hand and my thumb on the switch —” Duo lifts the hand that’s not clutching my shoulder and he mimes the moment from memory. “—and I remembered that soldier’s eyes when he’d looked at me.”

His hand trembles, his thumb poised over the detonator switch of the invisible remote. “I just stood there thinking about that. For a long time. And then I got angry. Angry with the Alliance for all the pain they’d caused. Angry with myself for hesitating.”

His thumb descends, forming a tight fist that brings the muscles of his bared forearm out in sharp relief. “I pressed the switch. I watched the show. Then I just tossed it aside and walked away.”

I can picture the moment easily. I can imagine a younger Duo dressed all in black, eyes shaded beneath the brim of his cap, contemplating the remote in his hands, contemplating the act he is about to commit. Hesitating as a possibility too painful to endure presents itself to him: forget about revenge and investigate the look in Kurt Franklin’s eyes, that moment of connection with an enemy. And I can see it happen as Duo’s expression hardens with anger and frustration. He’s lived for this moment for four years. He reminds himself of everything the Alliance has taken from him. He gets angry enough to press the trigger.

The world explodes around him, but he remains framed in the entrance to a dark, familiar alley. He watches, the flames and smoke reflecting in his eyes. My imagination shows me the silent, slim, dark figure as it turns and disappears into the shadows.

“I became Shinigami that night,” Duo tells me. “I mean, I’d suspected everything and everyone I loved would be taken from me, that Fate hated me, that I was cursed. But that night, I stopped letting the world take from me, and started taking from it. Took all the souls I thought I’d need to fix me.”
In a defeated whisper, Duo concludes, “But it didn’t fix me. None of it did. Just made everything hurt worse.” He coughs out a hopeless bubble of laughter. “A fucking pitch-black will, all right, and a way that leads straight to Hell.”

Catching sight of approaching potential witnesses — shop staff on their way to work — I haul Duo toward the nearest alley, the very one where I’d nearly lost him to skin hunters, and wrestle him into my arms. He stumbles and shakes. He’s scaring me. His fingers must be on the verge of cramping as they gouge relentlessly into my shoulder. His fist is twisted and tangled in my sweater over my heart. Stroking one hand slowly over Duo’s hair to comfort us both, I fumble for something—for the right thing—to say.

Before I can, Duo draws in a deep breath. He leans back just far enough to look into my eyes. I feel his gaze like I’d feel a punch to the gut. I’d always assumed that books exaggerate this sort of thing: a mere look—a gaze that’s not even promising hostile action—shouldn’t have the power to tilt the ground under your feet, but it can. It does.

Duo’s breathing stills. Attuned to the motions and mannerisms of his body, I find myself holding my breath as well.

He leans forward.

The touch of his lips at the corner of my mouth is electric. There it is; that word again: electric. It’s no less true now than it had been over a week ago. My entire body jerks. I rear back even as my arms tighten around him.

Very softly, I ask, “Why did you do that?”

“Uh...” The air floods back into Duo’s lungs, pushing his chest against mine. He looks everywhere except at my eyes. His entire body tenses as if for an oncoming fight and, suddenly, I know why he’d opened himself up to the pain on this thankfully quiet street. There are so many exits and alleyways to choose from. Here, he could so easily run and hide... all I’d have to do is loosen my hold and let him go.

I don’t.

Duo fumbles, squirms.

Have I made another mistake? If so, he’s not fighting me. Duo Maxwell is more than capable of throwing me off of him, I am sure. The fact that he’s still standing in the circle of my arms tells me that all’s not lost. Not yet.

What response is he looking for? Clearly, the one I’d given him had not been part of his plan. I’ve surprised him.

He struggles for words, “Um, well, I guess I was just thinking that, um... look, I know hanging out with me hasn’t exactly been a thrill-a-minute lately and I’ve gotten us in some pretty deep shit and I’ve really been bringing the party down with all of my issues and I just figured—”

My brain engages and politely fills me in on why Duo is reacting this way: I suddenly understand what he wants from me. What he needs.

I tell him, “Yes, Duo.”

Duo swallows, blinking. His voice almost cracks as he whispers back, “Yes... what?”
My hand — now tangled in Duo’s hair — slowly retreats. I’m careful not to pull the fine strands as I release his braid and bring my hand around to glide the backs of my fingers over Duo’s temple and down to his cheekbone. Gently. Reverently.

“Yes,” I murmur, “I want you.”

This isn’t about lust. I’m not flirting with him. I mean it. From the deepest, darkest part of my heart, whatever is left of it after everything I’ve done. I want Duo Maxwell. The boy who’d believed he’d been thrown away. The boy who had felt like just another piece of garbage littering the streets of this rundown-and-beaten, badly abused colony—

Oh, no.

That’s why he’s stuck to the res-den even though he could have stolen enough money to pay for a room; I’d seen him eyeing potential marks in the pub, so I know he’s considered it. And this is why he has continuously refused Jamesson’s standing offer to get us a room at the boarding house even though we can certainly afford it now. It’s why he has been so angry since introducing Jamesson to the gangs.

It’s not just the feeling of being used and manipulated. Duo doesn’t just feel powerless; he feels unwanted. He believes that the only people who had ever wanted him are all dead. Gone. He assumes that he is unwanted now.


A soundless gasp rushes between Duo’s lips. He blinks rapidly and his eyes widen, aware of me in a way that seems new but also long overdue. Drawn in by Duo’s sudden inhalation, I close the distance between our mouths slowly, so slowly. Duo could easily withdraw. I wait for him to tell me to stop. He doesn’t.

Is his heart pounding as hard and as swiftly as mine? Does it make his entire chest ache? Is he afraid of me, of what I’m feeling, of what I’ll try to tell him with this kiss?

Am I?

But it’s too late for me. I’m drawn in and my lips settle against Duo’s in a warm caress. I cradle Duo’s upper lip and then his lower, brush my mouth over the tender skin a second time. My eyelids are heavy, but I force them to stay open. His dark eyes nearly close as well, glittering with some emotion that makes my heart blister.

He leans into me. The air, though cold and unmoving, is charged around us. Crackling. Raising the fine hairs on my arms and the back of my neck. His fingers claw me closer. His take out bag bumps my lower back. Mine nudges his side. My lungs burn, but the kiss itself is lingering and gentle. Slow. Skin against skin. Warm caresses.

Arms around each other, just a few steps into an alley in a sleepy neighborhood, we kiss.

It’s just a restless, uncoordinated brush of skin. It’s just a chaste kiss.

And yet it isn’t.

It’s a chance at something fragile, a force that pushes back the darkness.

A strange power that I’d never known existed now thrums in my veins.
Duo takes my touch and my breath, and he gives me his in return. Soft friction that makes my lips tingle and heat blossom from within me, warming places in my spirit that have been left frigid and unattended for so long that I’d resigned myself to the fact that I would always feel numb.

It’s not a fact anymore.

The hand he’d clenched in the front of my sweater rises to cup my jaw and I shudder at this small proof that this kiss isn’t just for Duo’s sake and he knows it.

I breathe out his name.

His lips move infinitesimally, returning the caress on a breath of his own, asking one more time—just to be sure, “Tro, do you…?”

“Yes,” I answer softly, every fiber of my being vibrating with certainty. “I want you.”

Duo’s fingers twitch against my shoulder and tighten again. He presses himself bodily against me. My lips linger and I drink in this moment, unable to let go. It feels as if the slightest movement away from Duo will fragment my control and rip my chest wide open, spilling these painfully intense emotions into the street. And if the way Duo returns my hold is any indication, he feels the same as well.

But we do let go. Our hands and arms, our bodies untangle and move apart. Despite that, the connection remains. I know I’m not imagining this. That doesn’t mean Duo will finally stop drawing me in. He will. Of course he will. And I’ll let him.

All of this is finally starting to make sense: I’m the tide and he’s the moon in sky blue.

… DUO …

The bartender shakes his head at us as we pace the perimeter of our usual pool table, heckling. He’s not exactly on a first-name-basis with us or anything, but considering the fact that we’ve paid almost half a dozen visits to his little establishment in the last two weeks, he’s probably starting to think of us as “regulars.”

“You call that a shot?” I needle.

Trowa comes back swinging, “Is there a problem with your view?”

“My eye sight is fucking perfect.”

“It must be if you can still see the game all the way from the corner of shame you’re sitting in.”

“Ooh, I get it. You’re projecting. Reality is rough.”

He arches a brow — maybe two — and dares, “Humble me.”

With a wide, slow smile, I breathe, “I got you that.”

I lean over the edge of the pool table to line up my shot. Trowa plants his ass right next to my arm. I pause and glance up.

“Am I interfering with your concentration?” he teases with a perfectly straight face. His pool cue
stick is pointing up at the ceiling from between his legs. His long fingers are wrapped around its narrow girth, level with his crotch.

I stand up and smirk right in his smug face. “You are in my bubble. Back off.”

He slides down a measly inch.

“More off,” I direct.

Three inches this time.

I decide to fuck with him a bit. “Less off.”

He shifts an inch and a half closer.

“Stop. That’s perfect.” I resume my pose over the table. “For a right kidney shot.”

He doesn’t even flinch at the crack of the billiard balls. Bye-bye eight ball, side pocket.

“You win,” Trowa announces.

“And you’ve still got both kidneys!”

“Oh, I wasn’t complaining,” he assures me with an expression that’s probably supposed to be innocent.

Nothing today has been innocent, not since I’d finally peeled myself away from him in that damn alley. Talk about getting carried away. God knows where that pissed-off pity party had come from but if I get the same crowd-pleasing ender for the next one, I might just make a habit of emoting.

Moving out of range of Trowa’s body heat, I prowl around the table, thinking back to this morning: the two of us sitting side-by-side in the laundromat and conversing in accidental touches; our hands brushing as we both reach in to fetch our clean and dry clothes; our gazes locking over distances great and small all day long to the backdrop of muttered man-cursing and the ear-splitting squeals of power tools. Not an innocent moment in there at all. And now all that tension has carried over to our after-work play time.

It’s enough to give a guy a chronic case of hypertension. Among other things.

I pump another cred into the billiard table’s fee slot. I don’t even ask if Tro is game for another round. This is the closest thing we’ve got to target practice in this God forsaken metal can, and I’m not done shooting up rolly-poley mobile dolls yet.

Frankly, it’s either this or I go find some skin hunters to beat the hell out of. My only other option is kissing Trowa again and the mere thought of it gets me so wound up I doubt I’ll sleep for a week.

Tro sets up the game. I break. Yeah! Felt that, didn’t ya, you fucking OZ drones?

Trowa surveys the table. Lining up his victims.

I blurt, “You know, we should place bets on these games.”

He replies with mild curiosity as he lines up the cue stick, cue ball, and a hapless enemy mobile suit stand-in, “Why’s that?”

I lean on my pool cue, cocking a hip.
Trowa’s gaze flickers toward the motion.

My grin feels positively feral. “To make it more interesting, of course.”

“Playing against me isn’t interesting enough for you?”

Doing something against him sounds damn interesting to be completely honest… which I am not about to be—completely honest, that is.

Trowa shoots, sinks the enemy submarine or what-have-you, and straightens up. He takes one step to the left and lines up what could be Khushrenada’s flagship in his cross-hairs.

I allow my gaze to roam over him. Take my sweet time looking, too. In a voice that doesn’t carry past the two of us, I concede, “Well, ‘interesting’ isn’t the word I’d choose…”

Trowa pauses as he pulls back his cue. He glances at me over his shoulder, absorbs my mischievous grin, and very deliberately glides his gaze down my body and then back up again.

“I see your point,” he agrees.

I feel myself blush. Damn. Point to Trowa.

He returns his attention to the game with a slight smirk and, with a snap of his arm, he sends his intended target into the intended pocket. Bye-bye, Une.

Trowa idly inquires, “What do you want to wager?”

“I’m not sure,” I’m forced to admit. “I was kind of hoping you’d have an idea or two.”

Formulating his next move, Tro says, “There’s always laundry duty.”

“Nah. Too boring.”

“Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner.”

“We’ve been switching off on that anyway.”

He pauses before leaning over the table again and I take notice: he’s thought of something good. I can tell. He looks me in the eye and says, “A hot shower.”

I blink. Mouth on autopilot, I blurt, “Alone?”

Trowa stares at me for a minute. An entire God damn minute.

I’m blushing again. Jesus.

But then Trowa’s mouth stretches into a wide and completely gorgeous grin. He braces a hand on the table and laughs.

I just stand here, gaping like an idiot. The sight and sound of his mirth still does some some pretty interesting things to my pulse. A peculiar, but increasingly familiar, warmth blossoms deep in my belly and spreads outward in a quick, hot surge.

Eventually, I manage to find an answering chuckle of my own. It’s either that or let things happen below deck and this cue stick is so not gonna hide anything. Not that I have any secrets from Tro in that department. I’d pressed shamelessly up against him this morning during that kiss. More than
once today, I’d forced myself to look away from his intent stare and I’d had to give myself a moment to calm down. Let biz loosen up in the crotch department before I went back to whatever I was supposed to be doing. I know he’d noticed.

He notices just about everything. Including the sound of my hitching breath when he’d crowded me through the doorway as we’d come in here. After placing our orders, he’d let me have first crack at the restroom, where I’d given myself a good, long look in the dingy mirror. Asked myself what the hell it is I think I’m doing.

I still don’t know for sure.

But if I’ve got my hands on the controls, then I’d damn well better have a heading—if not a destination—in mind. I guess that’s what this is—that’s what I’m doing: teasing him into revealing something that will help me plot the course, gathering intel.

As I’m not quite sure what to make of his laughter — except to admit that I like the sound of it a whole fucking lot — I backpedal. Just to see if he’ll come chasing after me.

I clear my throat. “Er, sorry, Tro. That kinda... um...”

Can I claim “Freudian Slip” without giving the game away? Hell, the game is so wide open, it’s ridiculous. The real question is how deep do I wanna dig this hole?

Trowa ignores my strategic embarrassment. “The loser arranges for the winner to have a hot shower and a night in a real bed,” he tells me, still smiling.

Expensive stakes on this colony. I wheedle, “Does the loser get to use said shower and sleep in a real bed, too?”

“At the winner’s discretion.”

I mull this over. There are downsides, sure, but I trust Tro not to make me sleep on the floor. At least, not by myself. I nod slowly.

Trowa goes for his next shot.

I wait for the opportune moment and then I purr, “Deal.”

He’s wearing the sweater today, and I know he remembers our bargain from last Sunday because his arm twitches, sending the cue ball careening toward an unintended target, which rolls into the eight ball… which teeters on the edge of the corner pocket and then tumbles out of sight.

He looks up at me through his brows. Stretched out as he is—all poised and dangerous… shit, he’s never looked more predatory.

“Game over,” I inform him on a rasp. I fight the urge to clear my throat.

He straightens. Plucks at the hem of his sweater. Promises, “Nothing’s over yet.”

A tingle shoots through my fingertips. Clutching the cue stick tighter, I make a swipe for the chalk. Trowa turns his attention to his bag and I finish clearing the table. Working out some of the zing zooming through me.

Jesus. Who the hell needs masher when there’s Trowa and that look of his?

He digs in his duffel and manages to locate another cred.
By the time he’s done with that, I’m ready for the next round. I teasingly check, “You do know that the eight ball’s supposed to be the last one to go down, right?”

There it is again. That glare of his. All hot and half-concealed behind his hair. My blood tingles. Again.

“I do now,” he joshes me.

I supervise as Tro deposits the correct change into the table, releasing the balls. He’s still watching me as he digs them out of the holder and begins to rack them. I slide a hand into my pants pocket and pull out a coin.

“Flip for who breaks?” I ask.

Trowa finishes arranging the multicolored billiard balls and nods.

“You call it,” I tell him. “Ready?”

Trowa nods again.

I thumb the coin into the air with a smart ping!

“Tails.”

The lamplight flickers on the spinning coin until I snatch it from mid-air and slap it down on the back of my hand. Without looking at it, I stretch my arm under the hanging lamp hovering above the table. Lift my fingers.

Trowa’s gaze lowers. He smirks.

It’s tails.

I grin amicably, “Your move, Tro. Who goes first?”

He studies my face for a moment before deciding. “You do.”

“Yeah? OK.”

Trowa removes the guide and slides it into its slot at the side of the table. He holds out a hand in a silent request for the chalk cube. I toss and he catches with ease.

He chalks up and stretches his long arms out over the table. The crack of impact echoes in the pub.

Damn. That’s a fine break. I look up in time to see Trowa’s smirk.

Oh, yeah? Well, we’ll just see who’s smirking ten minutes from now, Smirky McSmirkypants.

I move in to set up my first shot. It’s a tough one. In fact, there are a bunch more easier marks on the table, but I’m not going for them. Nope. I wanna see the look on Trowa’s face when he figures out that I’m just now taking our games seriously.

With a snap, I execute. The target ball slams into the side pocket.

Trowa’s brows shoot up.

I work my way around the table, completing four shots easily. “You realize you’re goin’ down,
don’t you?” I check flippantly as I line up a fifth.

“In your wildest dreams, Maxwell.”

I bark out a laugh. “Shit, man. That sounded just like Wufei.”

“Wufei’s name and the word ‘shit’ in the same breath? You better hope I don’t say anything to him about that.”

“You’d let Wufei beat me up? Or worse—give me the Look? What kind of friend are you?”

“One you don’t want to mess with.”

“I’ll say. Just how cruel is your unusual?”

“If we’re not too busy tomorrow evening, let’s go find some puppies to kick.”

I snort... then snicker... and finally laugh. “Tro—man—you have—a wicked sick—sense of humor.”

“So I’m discovering.”

Whew! Deep breath. OK, now. I put away that fifth shot.

“What do you mean you’re ‘discovering’?” I huff out on a fading cackle. With a shake of my head and a lingering smile, I circle the table. “Didn’t you already know you were such a sick and twisted individual?”

“Not before I started hanging out with you,” Trowa confesses, baldly.

“Denial, huh? Yeah, that’s a bitch to wake up from.”

“I have no complaints on how I wake up these days.”

I nearly drop the cue stick. Flexing my fingers to work the feeling back into them, I attempt to banter us back on track, “You better watch it, pal. Morning people are at the top of my short list.”

“I’m honored.”

“I didn’t say your name was on it.”

“You didn’t say it wasn’t.”

I roll my eyes. “You don’t wanna be on my list. Trust me.”

“I do.”

Aborting the approach for my sixth shot, I gape at him from across the table. There is no way I’m going to try and figure out what he means by that.

Yet again, I make an effort to move us along, “The hell, man. Smirk or something already. You’re freaking me out.”

“Anything for you.” He smirks.

“That’s more like it.”

“If you like that, there’s more.”
Holy hell. “Where is all this coming from, Sir Smilesalot?”

Before I can ask if he’s just really excited about tonight’s dinner special, he quietly calls my name.

I stare at him for a long moment before I give in. “What?”

He shakes his head. “The answer to your question.”

I look away. Focus on that damn sixth shot that’s still waiting for me. “That wasn’t an answer.”

Still completely relaxed, Trowa argues, “Yes. It is.”

“Well, I’m glad that makes sense to you.” I draw in a deep breath, attention riveted to the billiard table.

Trowa shifts, sapping my concentration. He meanders slowly around the table toward me in unnerving silence. The asshole is deliberately messing with me, trying to get me to screw up the shot. I know this.

Knowing it doesn’t help me block out his presence when he leans back against the edge of the table right next to me. “It does make sense,” he insists.

The one green eye that I can see sparkles. He tilts his head to the side and his bangs fall away so that he’s showing me the other one, too. Letting me take a long look at his open expression. His lips curve into a soft smile. “Sink your next shot and I’ll show you.”

Sweet Jesus. I think he already has.

I retreat with a gulp. I’ve killed people with my bare hands. I’ve piloted machines of mass destruction. I’ve jumped out of skyscrapers with nothing but a collapsible, hand-held rotor blade gizmo to keep me from splatting on the pavement like dollop of peanut butter. And now, of all times, I lose my shit.

Forcing a deep breath, I rove around the table, pretending to look for a better angle of attack. Trowa watches me and I can’t seem to get my hands to stop shaking.

I study the table. Give up on the shot I’d been planning. Chose to try for another. Resume my pose, line up the cue ball…

Jesus. Is Trowa serious?

All it takes is a quick glance for me to figure that one out: yes, he is. Very serious. Sincere, too.

Is this really happening? To me?

It certainly seems to be.

Do I want it to?

God damn it!

I snap the cue stick forward. It glances off the cue ball, which spins across the felt and kisses my new target, which rolls a piddly two inches and then stops. Nowhere near the damn hole.

I lunge away from the table. Furious and frustrated.
Trowa surveys the game’s landscape and begins to play. I watch him like a shop security camera follows a vagrant, but he doesn’t seem the least bit bothered by what he’d almost said. His breathing stays regular. His attention sharp.

I can’t think of a single thing to chuck into the silence.

Ball after ball disappears from view. Hm. I guess I hadn’t been the only one concealing his inner ruthless.

After nearly five very painful minutes of tense silence, Trowa says, “You know, I could miss this shot and let you win.”

I startle, realizing in that moment that the hustler has been hustled. Tro had set this wager up: he’d had me go first and clear the table a bit before intentionally distracting me into screwing up so that he could whip out his billiard skills of awesome and win. That had been his plan all along: to win, to let me do this favor for him and maybe square us up a little bit. Because I’m well aware of the fact that I owe him. My sanity, definitely. My life, most certainly.

He’d manipulated me like a pro and now he’s got me right where he wants me.

But he’ll give up the win if I ask him to.

He may have mindfucked me into missing my shot earlier, but this, right here, is as good as a declaration of love.

God damn, but Trowa Barton is one slick fella.

My chin goes up. My fingers tighten around the cue stick. Something almost like rage — hard and suffocating — fills my chest. He’s playing a dangerous game. My eyes narrow. I bark, “The hell you will.”

He grins.

God help me. When he looks at me like that, I don’t give a damn how dangerous this is. Death can just fuck off. I’ll protect Trowa. I will.

I growl, “You lose on purpose and I’ll kick your ass.”

“You and what army?”

“Pretty cocky for a guy who’s never been on a date, aren’t you?”

“Are you calling my masculinity into question?”

“No, just your imagination and charm.”

“So all you’re after is my body. Good to know.”

“I’m not even gonna touch that.”

“Why not? You might like it.”

“Do I look like I was born yesterday?”

“You look like you’re one shot away from finding me that hot shower.”
“Yeah, well, there’s worse fates.” I fake a nonchalant shrug.

Trowa steps away from the table. He only has the eight ball left and it’s an obscenely clear shot. He looks up at me and says quietly, “It’s not too late to call it off.”

Are we talking about the wager? Or are we also talking about that look in his eyes?

Does it matter?

I don’t need Trowa to answer this question for me. I’ve had plenty of experience with needing things like food, drinkable water, shelter, and vengeance to know what it feels like to want something.

I want.

So does he.

But he’s gotta be sure. I need him to be completely sure.

And I need to be sure of him.

My voice is hoarse when I give him one last warning: “Proceed at your own peril.”

He studies me for a long moment.

He accepts those terms: “All right.”

He leans over the table, shoots, and the eight ball disappears from sight.

Chapter End Notes

The rotor blade gizmo that Duo used and his jump out of a skyscraper happens in the first couple of episodes of the series when he comes to Heero’s rescue after shooting him.
At the Inn

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Language, UST, references to not-nice aspects of L2 culture/society (nothing explicit... mostly Duo being sarcastic and suspicious)


Music Rec: “Goodnight and Go” by Imogen Heap

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

... TROWA ...

“We... I...” Cathy takes a fortifying breath and begins anew. “How are you Trowa?”

Noting her struggle with words, I respond carefully, “I’m fine.” I pause to examine her image in the vid screen. “Have you been sleeping?”

She forces a smile and shrugs. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. I just picked up a book and couldn’t put it down last night.”

“Hm.” It’s a lie, but I don’t call her out on it.

“How’s Duo?” she returns quickly, eager to redirect the conversation.

“All right,” I tell her honestly. Over the past three days, he’s calmed, settled, and started to smile at his own inner musings. I’ve come to appreciate those mysterious grins just as much as the camaraderie in his gaze. If I look quickly enough, sometimes I catch a glimpse of something that makes my heart pound.

“I’m glad you’re both OK,” Cathy comments with genuine relief. “There’s not much new happening here. The manager’s still grumping about how you’re never going to have enough time to learn the new routines, the lions are moping, and the mechanics are threatening to quit now that you aren’t here to give them a hand. You know, the usual.”

My mouth twitches. “Yeah.”

“Well, I’d better go. Thanks for calling, Trowa. It was nice to hear from you.”


The screen goes blank but not before I see the sheen of tears in her eyes. I remain standing there in the vid phone booth, wondering what could bring the strong and opinionated Catherine Bloom to near tears. I’d seen her cry years ago when I’d tried to kill myself, and again when I’d left to fight in the final battle. But never since.

I lean back against the wall and cross my arms over my chest. I’m torn. For the first time in my life,
there’s more than one place where I’m needed. Duo had needed me more — that is unquestionable — but why had Cathy taken my departure so hard? I’d been so focused on finding Duo, on puzzling out my own obsession with him, that I’d never wondered why she’d seemed so scared.

I am sure that if she were in danger, she would tell me, so that’s not it.

But, for the life of me, I can’t begin to guess what else could be the matter.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have left.

But no. As soon as that thought crosses my mind, I know it’s wrong.

I have no regrets. I’m glad I’d let that dream needle its way into my mind. I’m glad I’d come here and so very thankful that I’d found Duo no later than I had. And in him, I’d found a friend — no, more than a friend. I’d found someone who challenges me, inspires me, effortlessly halves my own pain, makes me smile and laugh more than I ever have in my entire, wretched life.

I want to do the same for him.

I recall the look I’d given him at the bar during our wagered pool game. A look that had rattled him badly enough for him to miss a simple shot.

It is taking all of the skill I’ve acquired throughout my life to read Duo Maxwell. And despite that, I sometimes miss. That look in the bar — I’d thought he was ready for that, but I’d been wrong.

My first inclination had been to surrender ground, but I’d fought it. Backing down from a fight wouldn’t earn me respect in the res-den and it wouldn’t earn me Duo’s confidence, so I’d fought back. Bantered over a billiard table. Wagered and won a frivolous bet. Bumped his elbow intentionally as we’d dug into our daily specials. That night, I’d looped my arm over his waist in the dark and waited for him to draw the line, to suggest that we separate our sleeping bags and go back to the way things used to be.

I can’t go back to the way things used to be.

When Duo had remained silent and had eventually fallen asleep beside me, I’d let myself wonder if maybe it’s the same for him.

Three days of literal and metaphorical windless calm. Three mornings of waking with Duo curled up against me. So warm. So real. This morning, I’d closed my eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but then Duo had snuggled even closer, one thigh sliding over mine and his morning arousal nudging my hip. For the third morning in a row.

Duo certainly does enjoy pushing me — teasing me — whether he means to or not.

I watch people; Duo plays people. He’d been playing the evening of our wager. I’d surprised him with my honesty. There’s no other explanation for his reaction.

Ever since the day of that kiss, he has been in a clear state of flux. A dangerous riptide of flirting heavily but then backing off at the first hint of anything unexpected. I haven’t attempted to discourage him; I tend to make better progress by simply going with the flow.

Today’s lunch break had brought with it a welcome opportunity to test the waters. I’d been able to turn my full attention to the anecdotes that Duo had related with gusto. I’d looked Duo’s way as Jamesson had laughed heartily and the crew had guffawed; I’d looked Duo’s way and I had made no effort to hide my emotions from him.
I’d smiled. I’d watched as his breath had caught… and then he’d smiled back.

Progress. Slowly but surely.

My lips part as I draw in a breath. The gentle friction of the air, so subtle but so swiftly bringing the memory of that kiss in the alley back to me. Even now, the power of that moment forces my eyes shut, makes my jaw clench, gives my entire being a soft thrill.

In all my life I’d never felt—known—anything like that. How had a moment that had begun with the intention of reassuring Duo managed to have such a profound effect on me as well?

I don’t know.

But there’s no turning back for me now. If there ever had been.

I want him.

I want his nights, his mornings, his very presence.

I like tucking myself into the sleeping bag beside him and waking up to his warmth, the rhythm of his breaths, the soft sighs and hums he makes as he wiggles closer. I’d even go back to eating peanut butter sandwiches with him for breakfast and lunch every day, and I’d gladly continue playing billiards as we wait for our tasteless dinners to be made in the evening. I want this: life with him. Though I’d initially set out to help Duo, I find myself caught.

The church is nearly complete, which means our time on this colony will be at an end. Duo still hasn’t shared his plans with me. Or if he even thinks I’ll have a place in them.

I do. I’m certain of it. I just have to be more stubborn than him about it.

The sharp sound of someone tapping on the booth’s door tugs me out of my thoughts. Somewhat reluctantly, I straighten away from the wall. I shouldn’t have stayed so long; other people could be waiting to use the vid phone. And besides, I need to get back to the laundromat to fetch, fold, and pack up my clean clothes.

I open the door and make way for the next person in line, but a pair of dark eyes and a mischievous grin stop me.

“Duo,” I say stupidly. Had the laundry finished already?

“Heya, Tro,” he replies with an easy grin and holds out a familiar duffel bag. A familiar, full duffel bag.

“What’s all this?” I automatically accept my own luggage.

Duo arches a brow. “Your shit, dude,” he retorts literally, ignoring my surprise; he’s never helped me with my laundry before. One side of his mouth twitches upward. “Like hell I’m carrying it all the way across the colony. There wasn’t anything in the bet about that.”

The bet. I’d been starting to wonder if he’d taken it seriously.

“An oversight on my part,” I mumble, slinging the strap over my shoulder.

“You all right, man?”

“I’m fine.”
“Hm,” Duo says neutrally. “C’mon,” he invites with a gesture. “Places to go and all that.”

As I follow him away from the market, I ask, “Where would that be?”

Duo sends me a sidelong glance. I know this sly look. He’s really going to make me work for it.

“To take care of that bet” is all he says.

“That’s not a destination,” I point out. My voice is as bland as my curiosity is energized. At least my longer legs are a help in keeping up with Duo’s quick and enthusiastic strides.

Duo grins with considerable relish. “Oh, it will be. Trust me.”

Noting the somewhat sadistic glee in his face, I deadpan, “Unfortunately, I already do.”

Duo laughs. “Said like a man about to face a firing squad. Shall I offer you a blindfold and a cigarette?”

“If you actually have those on you, I’d prefer not to know about it.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure, Tro?”

“With all those poisonous reptiles I’d be missing if I worked in a pet store.”

“You know, there’s a clinical name for people like you.”

“Brilliant?”

“Bonkers.”

“That’s not a clinical name,” I inform him, feeling my mouth begin to stretch into a smile.

“Sure it is. My therapist calls me that all the time.”

“You don’t have a therapist.”

“If I didn’t have you, I would.”

“That doesn’t count,” I retort in a voice that sounds thick to my ears.

“Sure it does.”

“Then it’s a good thing we keep separate scoreboards.”

“Am I winning most of the time on yours, too?”

I’m definitely smiling now. I avoid his gaze by squinting into the distance. “Much to my dismay,” I intone drolly.

“Yeah, you sound really broken up by it,” Duo observes.

“I internalize.”

Duo laughs. “Of that I have absolutely no doubt, man.”

I fold my hands into my pockets and concede the battle of wits. I content myself with walking in silence for a fair distance, simply soaking up Duo’s presence at my side. There’s no point in
asking about our destination again. I don’t even bother to call up my memory of the colony map to consider what hotels might be in the direction Duo has chosen. It’s surprisingly easy to put aside my need for control and just docilely trail along.

When a colony police officer eyes us from his patrol car, Duo pulls a glossy pamphlet from his back pocket, pausing to put on a show of checking our route. He grins at me over his shoulder. “You’re gonna thank me for finding this place.”

“Is that so?” And I have to ask, “Do people actually come here for sightseeing?”

“Sure. This is one of the oldest colonies ever built. It’s got a couple of decent colleges, too. Plus, the recycling center—most of the other ones are based off of its design.”

The police cruiser idles onward.

Interestingly, Duo doesn’t drop the act. “Never done much sight-seeing myself. You?”

“Virtually none.”

“Cool!”

Eyeing his enthusiastic grin, I accuse, “You’d insist on going first into the home of an ax murderer, wouldn’t you?”

His grin is sudden, cocky, and intensely satisfying. “Hell, I just about crash-landed on a planet that’s covered — like 60% of its surface area covered — in water without knowing how to do more than the dead man’s float and pray.”

“God help us.”

His cackle pulls a smile from me.

A considerable amount of time and increasingly impressive real estate passes before Duo finally steps off of the sidewalk and approaches a residence. I stop at the edge of the path to take in the neo-Victorian home that sprawls across the painstakingly tiled plot. Simulated vines carved from translucent resin strain up the archway that leads to the patio around back.

I gape at our destination. The hand-painted sign in front of the veranda reads: Morning Glory Inn and Restaurant.

“Duo?”

With one foot on the first step, Duo pauses and turns around. “Yeah, Tro?”

I can’t look him in the eye. With that pleased sparkle, Duo could get me to agree to anything. Even this place. I scan the elegant architecture of the almost-mansion, searching for words to express my total disbelief.

It’s hard to believe that something this fine is a mere forty-minute walk from the borders of the res-den and fac-tric, but as I gaze further up the street, I can see the gated walls of aristocratic, palatial homes.

I finally say, “You’d spring for this, but you wouldn’t carry my bag?”

Duo laughs. He hadn’t expected that. “Hey, I’ve gotta prioritize.”
“Hm.” Still, I don’t follow him up the steps.

“Tro, no one ever got a hot shower out on the sidewalk. Not on this colony, anyway.” He winks.

Damn. He looks so happy. Very softly, I point out, “You can’t afford this.”

Duo’s smile only widens. “Already bought and paid for. You’re not gonna suggest we head over to one of those economy hotels, are you?” he asks with a single brow raised.

No, I am not, but—I bite back a sigh and turn to take a second look at the delicate, if lifeless, landscaping and the softly glowing, spotless windows. Why would Duo spend money on a place like this when there are a good many other adequate and less expensive hotels on the colony?

I glance at Duo again. That soft, mysterious look in his eyes. I’m reasonably certain that my face reveals nothing of my thoughts, but I don’t think it matters: he sees into me, regardless. My fingers tighten around the straps of my duffel bag. My wrists tingle with the whisper of adrenalin. The muscles over my heart tense.

“What other surprises do you have planned, Duo?”

Still smiling, Duo promises, “Only good ones.”

I have no reply to that.

Duo gestures grandly to the front door. With a slight bow and smirk, he invites, “After you.”

...DUO...

“I think I underestimated you,” Trowa says, facing the window and aiming his words at the cold evening provided by the colony’s weather control geeks.

Walking up beside him, I grin. Hell, the grin might just be permanent; I’ve certainly been getting a whole lotta mileage out of it today. It had been hell keeping this a secret from him, but the look on his face outside? Oh, yeah. Totally worth it.

“Yeah,” I commiserate, giving his shoulder a pat. I don’t lean on him. My wet hair will drench his clean duds. And I’m shirtless. After days of doing my damnedest to keep things friendly but not too friendly… yeah, talk about sending mixed signals. The blow dryer dangling from the cord looped through my fingers knocks against my knee as I move away. Ow. Note to self: jeans are not a substitute for actual knee pads.

“Yup, you underestimated me.” I blithely continue, “I hear there’s even a support group for it now — a lot of people have that same problem.”

Though, honestly, it’s not so much a problem as a death sentence. I turn my thoughts away from the many, many faces of the people who had underestimated me, Duo Maxwell, Gundam pilot 02. Most have no face at all.

Trowa’s isn’t among them.

If anything, I’m the one who tends to underestimate him. Quiet doesn’t necessarily mean quiescent.

I take my time hunting for a convenient electrical outlet.
I remember Trowa using that exact word. Truth and whiskey. Favorite colors and wartime philosophy. And “electric.” That kiss on the street had been that. It had energized me. Wound me up and made my head spin.

For the past three days, I’ve been slowly dying inside… and then being reborn every time I relive that kiss. Oh, God what a kiss. Is it supposed to be so damn warm? Is it supposed to feel like a bazillion little champagne bubbles under every inch of your skin? Which makes no fucking sense at all. I mean, it’s just two pairs of lips moving against each other, right? It’s just skin. Just like words—three words: “I want you”—are just noise to ease the silence back.

I’d honestly thought that until one look from a pair of green eyes over a billiard table had grounded me. That look. Jesus.

Yes, a kiss is just the touch of skin. Yes, words are just human noise. But with Trowa, they’re more.

I feel goose bumps race up my bare arms.

“Cold?” Trowa asks, shifting away from the window. Holy hell. He’ll totally go out of his way to futz with the room’s climate controls if I so much as nod.

“Nah.” I waggle the blow dryer. “Got it covered.”

And there it is again—just a brief glimpse as he turns back to the window—that look.

It still scares me both spitless and shitless.

Because I’ve started to like it. Look for it. Return it.

That first night, I’d been terrified of closing my eyes, convinced that I’d wake up to the crushing reality that I’d dreamed up that kiss or imagined that look. But I hadn’t. I’d woken up in his arms, his chin tilted against my brow in the soft glow of early morning. I’d inhaled deeply. He’d rubbed my back. My arousal had been making its very friendly acquaintance with his hip—all, hey, how ya doin’?—but Trowa hadn’t done a single thing about it. When I’d drummed up the courage to pull back, he’d given me a drowsy smile and a soft “Hm” of greeting.

For the past three days, it’s been like that. An undemanding but constant awareness of each other. There’s a brief moment as we settle down to sleep when Trowa tugs me close, his arm flexing and his palm flattening against my thrumming heart, before he relaxes his hold and drifts off. Spooned up as usual with me commandeering the exit.

For three days, I’ve been waiting for him to push me for more—for just a repeat of that kiss, even—but he hasn’t. He hasn’t even brought it up. He hasn’t tried to play off those three words for a favor, either. He’s just… stayed.

So. This isn’t about sex.

All he seems to want is… me. No ulterior motives. No trade, no con, no scam.

Clearly, he hadn’t grown up on this colony.

I still haven’t figured him out. I know he’s got secrets. There are, easily, a thousand questions I could be asking him, but I don’t. People lie. Even when they don’t mean to. My best bet had been
to sit back and watch him. If I’d gone with my usual response to shit, I’d have pushed him. The
temptation is still there, but…

But I what if I push so hard that I end up pushing him away?

That is the very last thing I want.

I plug in the hair dryer and snag my brush from the somewhat rumpled surface of the wide
feather bed.

Still feeling Trowa’s gaze following me, I toss some conversation into the room, “Not only did you
leave me some hot water, you even tested out the bed. You’d better be careful there, Tro. You’re
spoiling me.”

“It’s all part of my master plan,” he assures me against the backdrop of the colony at twilight.

I tease, “Oh? Today, Duo Maxwell; tomorrow, the world? That sort of thing?”

Trowa chuckles softly. “I’d be happy with just Duo Maxwell.”

I look up. Trowa’s entire back is tense. His fingers, where they grip the window molding, tighten.

Oh. Wow. So he’s really as uncertain about me as I am about him? Huh.

For such a smart guy, Trowa can be a real idiot sometimes. I beam at his back. Just in case he can
see it reflected in the crystal-clear pane.

“Well, if that’s the case, I don’t think you’ll encounter much resistance.”

Not like the one I’m about to launch an attack on. I have a special hatred for blow dryers, but we’re
on a schedule tonight, so… here goes nothing. I wrestle with the brush and blow dryer for two of
the longest and most frustrating minutes of my life before I see Trowa’s bare feet on the rug in front
of me. I shove back the curtain of damp hair and find him mutely holding out his hand.

“Resistance is futile,” Trowa agrees.

With some misgivings, I flip the hair brush and place the handle across his palm. The bed dips
behind me as Trowa climbs up. When the other hand appears from over my shoulder, I forfeit the
dryer as well.

“Resistance may be futile,” I grumble over the rumbling of the dryer, “but if you frizz my hair out,
I’ll hurt you.”

Trowa begins to comb through the damp strands. “Promises, promises.”

Chapter End Notes

During the series, Trowa has an affinity for the lions at the circus and vice versa. Also,
in early episodes, we see the circus manager stomping around calling Trowa a lazy punk
or some such nonsense.
Also during the series, Trowa uses his Gundam in an act when the circus is performing at an OZ base and/or for OZ soldiers. (It’s been a while since I’ve seen this episode.) Cathy figures out that Trowa's the pilot and that he's on a suicide mission and she totally socks him for it.

So, we finally get to see more of the colony outside of the abandoned res-den. The nicer areas have police presence during the day and private security (which is necessary for confining serious crime to the res-den).
... TROWA ...

Duo had listened to my protests; there hadn’t been anything in the bet about buying dinner.

Then he’d shrugged and smiled. “It’s all part of the package,” he’d replied lightly.

“Is this a special occasion?” I’d ferreted, scanning the inn’s menu by the soft candlelight illuminating our table for two.

That increasingly familiar, mysterious grin had reappeared for a brief instant. “Maybe,” Duo had allowed. “Now stop glaring at all the posh shit and pick a dish. I’m starving.”

So we’d eaten.

And now, as Duo holds open the front door for me, he inhales the early night air deeply. “Oh, man,” he sighs, “I think I’ve just been ruined for peanut butter sandwiches.”

“What’s this?” I inquire, looking from him to the open front door. I’m not protesting — I know it won’t do any good — but I’m allowed to be curious, aren’t I?

Duo rocks back on his heels. “The night is young! Did you really just want to go back upstairs and watch each other breathe for the next couple hours?” He doesn’t wait for a reply. “Me neither. So, c’mon.”

With a resigned sigh that does nothing to eliminate the pleasant buzz of anticipation in my veins, I silently cross the threshold and jog down the stairs.

As we stroll down the sidewalk, Duo remarks, “You know, I’m really enjoying this more agreeable side of you, Tro.”

“I’m generally disagreeable?” I counter, brows rising.

With a soft chuckle, Duo tells me, “Let’s just say you’re not a big fan of surprises.”

A soft noise vibrates in the back of of my throat at the understatement.

“Is it so hard trusting me?” Duo asks after a few more paces in silence.

Duo grins. “Thanks, man. Even if it’s a lie, it’s a nice one.”

“I won’t lie to you,” I promise softly.

Duo shakes his head. “Don’t say that. You have before. You might need to again. So don’t promise me, OK?”

I slow to a stop on the sidewalk. “It’s not OK, Duo.” I seek out Duo’s gaze in the dimming light. “No more lies.”

Dredging up a half smile, Duo persists, “That one of those future facts?”

“No. It’s been a fact for a while.”

“Hm,” Duo hums and it chafes that I can’t make him believe me, but I’m not going to make an issue of it. Not here. Not tonight.

I let Duo steer me past a large sign announcing the presence of one of L2’s few liberal arts colleges. I’m frowning, trying to puzzle out his plans, as I glance in Duo’s direction but his face gives nothing away.

I have to admire his aplomb. Duo strolls right up to the school door and motions me into the fine arts building. Duo waves to the security guard manning the reception booth. The man nods without looking up from the day’s ESUN news sheet. I assume we look young enough and respectable enough to pass for students.

“You didn’t sign me up for a pottery class, did you?” I joke as we step into the cavernous lobby.

“Naw. Not enough sharp objects,” Duo tells me. “And all their sculpture courses were full.”

“Damn.”

My gaze sweeps more leisurely over the lobby, taking in the sight of several student works displayed on the walls and near the plain, serviceable benches. One particular painting catches my attention and I wander closer for a better look. I study it beneath the soft white noise generated by the overhead lights until Duo steps up next to me.

“What are we doing here?” I ask curiously.

Duo slowly draws in a breath to speak. In that moment, the first strains of music spill into the lobby from a nearby rehearsal room. We both pause and listen as what sounds like a full orchestra is put through its warm-up paces.

When the students are allowed a brief pause, Duo finally replies on a whisper, “Listening.”

He gestures to the artworks scattered throughout the room. “Looking.”

Turning back to me, he asks, “What’s your pleasure?”

As Duo’s plans for the evening finally make sense, I find myself smiling. With a shake of my head at Duo’s uncanny ability to surprise me, I settle on a nearby bench, leaving plenty of room for Duo to join me, which he does. Leaning back against the cold wall of the classroom behind us, our shoulders touching, I close my eyes and listen to the melodic merging of dozens of individuals in the
room just around the corner.

For the better part of half an hour, we sit — almost leaning on each other — and I let the music chase all thoughts from my mind. During a particularly intense, soaring piece, I shiver. I know Duo notices; his fingertips drift over the back of my hand. I swiftly capture his fingers and hold on tightly until the song ends.

When the sounds from within the room change — chair legs skid across the floor and instruments are set down carefully — Duo nudges me.

“C’mon, Tro,” he says, standing. “They’re taking a break. In about two minutes this lobby’s going to be packed with music students.”

I reluctantly unfold myself from my comfortable slouch and follow Duo down a small hallway. We wander past the empty classrooms, spying half-finished canvas paintings upon metal easels, worktables and printing presses. In between the doors, bulletin boards are crammed with sketches and prints and photographs. As we meander further, an entirely different kind of music slowly increases in volume. Rounding the next corner, we see a gray metal door with a sign reading “Darkroom” standing open in the hall.

Movement from within the room snags our attention. We watch as a dark-haired young woman works at a large sink, completely focused on her task even when a slender girl with her blond hair cut in a short, pixie style embraces her from behind.

“Please? Just one dance?” the blonde cajoles softly.

There’s a short, indecisive pause from the woman working at the sink.

“I know you love this song...” The blond girl reaches past her companion’s shoulder and slowly adjusts the volume on the music player.

As the music begins to fill the small room, a sigh of acquiescence escapes the long-haired girl. “OK,” she concedes. She dries her hands on a yellowed towel and turns to her lover. “Just don’t even think about dipping me.”

“You’re no fun,” the blonde says affectionately.

Slowly – so as not to draw attention to Duo and myself – I retreat back toward the lobby. I take two steps before it becomes clear that Duo isn’t moving with me. He’s frozen in the shadows, listening to the music. His arms cross over his chest and that’s when the lyrics begin to register. The refrain builds, remaining soft but the melody expands to fill every void in the tune.

“You see everything... you see every part...
“You see all my light... and you love my dark...
“You dig everything of which I’m ashamed...
“There’s not anything to which you can’t relate...
“And you’re still here...”

With those words, Duo lifts his gaze to mine. The lyrics vibrate in the air between us. As does the memory:
“Damn it! I do not want you to see me like this!”

“Do not presume to know what it is I see.”

A shudder travels the length of Duo’s body and I move in, draw him close. Sharing warmth. I tilt my head toward his, analyze the nuanced scent of the inn’s expensive shampoo. I hold onto him and listen to the song.

It’s uncanny how perfectly the lyrics resonate with us. Everything Duo has shown me of his past, I’ve understood. With every horror revealed, I’ve only appreciated his strength more. With every day that passes, I’ve loved him more.

I love Duo.

I have for some time now. I would have told him the night at the bar, over the billiard table, if he hadn’t been so rattled by the hint I’d given him. I’ve met every questing and questioning glance from him with my own certainty. I know what I feel. The next move is his.

The song dies away and, with both hands on Duo’s shoulders, I steer him back to the foyer. The orchestra members have already resumed their seats and soft, melodic chords are spilling from beyond the closed doors.

As we move to retake our seats, Duo’s fingertips trail down my arm, calling forth shivers of a different kind and guiding me down beside him. A moment later I find myself with Duo’s arm draped warmly over my shoulders and my back pressed to Duo’s chest. I must be heavy; this cannot be comfortable for him, but when I attempt to shift my weight away from Duo, the arm around me tightens and he merely shakes his head.

“Stay,” he breathes. Softly. So as not to break the beauty of the music.

I stay.

I reach for his arms and wrap myself up in them until he nuzzles the edge of my ear. Duo’s chest moves with each breath, slow and regular. I measure his pulse in his wrists until Duo takes my hands and I interlace our fingers.

The music continues until it fades away.

Class is over. It’s time for us to leave. This time, I lead Duo back to our lodgings. I keep hold of his left hand, though I know it doesn’t matter which I choose: both Duo and I are ambidextrous. By necessity if not nature.

“So, how’d I do?” he asks as we pass under a streetlamp.

“Hm?”

“Our date,” he clarifies.

I feel my lips stretch into a smile. “Imagination, check. Charm, check.”

“I think I’m forgetting something, though.”

I cannot fathom what that could possibly be. “It’ll come to you.”

“Will he?”
That gets my attention. I look him in the eye.

Duo swiftly licks his lower lip. Bites it. “Suppose what’s missing is a kiss. D’you think he’d go for it?”

“Who’s this ‘he’?” I tease. “Are we talking about the fish turd in your pocket?”

“How’d you know it was there?” He grins widely, laughing at me in silence.

“Some people call me the Turd Whisperer.”

Duo barks out a laugh. “Jesus, Tro. If you don’t want me to kiss you, just say so and put me out of my misery.”

I don’t let myself think about it. I tug on his hand, step into his space, and lower my lips to his. I brush gently, like last time, but I’m not kissing the same Duo that I’d caged and confronted then. He’s not on the verge of running from me, and that becomes abundantly clear when his fingers slide into my hair and he tilts his head, angling our mouths into full contact.

No, Duo isn’t an angry, wild thing torn between seeking reassurance and fleeing. He’s the pool hustler, the Gundam pilot, the rebel soldier. He rubs his lips against mine, pets my lower lip with his tongue, then nips playfully.

Tingles of lust erupt deep in the base of my spine.

I pull back. “This wasn’t part of the wager,” I remind him.

He releases his hold on my head, dropping his arm to his side. Our hands stay locked together.

“It’s not,” he agrees. “But it can count as part of our date if you want it to.”

“Wager, date, whatever,” I answer, staring helplessly at his mouth, “I don’t care so long as it does count.”

His hand reaches up again, this time to trace the contours of my face. He nods. “It counts.”

He shifts closer to me, his gaze studying my face, and I have to remind him, warn him, “You know why I smile so much these days?”

“Yeah, Tro. I know.” He swallows thickly. “D’you know why it scares me?”

I shake my head, conceding defeat.

“’Cause I feel it, too.”

I reach for his questing fingers and bring them to my lips. “That means we’re in this together, then.”

“Together until…?” he prompts.

I don’t know how long this will last. What I do know is that I’m not going to try and stop it.

He needs and answer, though. I mumble, “For as long as you let me.”

His fingers pull free of my grasp, nudge my bangs aside, and then he’s leaning up to kiss me again. A soft, tingling brush. I’ve had so little pleasure in my life, so few joys or treasures. Does Duo realize how dangerous this is? How close I am to latching onto him and never, ever letting go no
matter what?

He steps back. Looks at me with dark eyes and I can’t read the expression on his face. My heart races.

He starts walking again. We go back to the room. The silence is somehow both heavy and restless between us. Duo brushes his teeth, uses the facilities. I change into a simple undershirt and my pair of cotton sleep pants. When Duo comes out of the bathroom, I take my turn. He’s already in bed, snuggled under the covers, by the time I come out.

I’m not sure what this is – what we are or where we stand. But it’s dark outside. Time for bed. I don’t try to fight our routine.

I reach for the light on the bedside table.

“Leave it on,” Duo requests, lifting the covers for me.

I slide between them.

We stare at each other for a long moment. I wait for Duo to roll over and assume our usual sleeping arrangement. He draws a shuddering breath.

“Everyone who’s ever gotten close to me — everyone I let get close to me — has been hurt or killed,” he warns me.

I confess, “I’ve never let anyone get close to me.”

The newness of our connection has unsettled me on more than one occasion, forcing me to fall back on the lessons I’d learned as a child: stay silent and watch, wait for an opening to exploit, make a choice: fight or flee. Above all else, stay alive. Only my skills at observation are of any use to me here, now, with him. The emotions he calls forth in me — I’m woefully out of my depth.

I tell him, “I’ll make mistakes.”

Duo’s hand slides across the soft surface of the bed between us. “I’ll help you fix ‘em.” His lips quirk. “I’m pretty good at fixing things.”

I’d spent most of my childhood repairing rundown mobile suits and jimmy-rigging obsolete weapons. Could this be that easy?

Duo’s hand rests midway between our bodies.

“I’ve heard that rumor,” I admit and then add one of my own, “I’ve been called a tough sonuvabitch.”

Duo chuckles. “What about ‘heartless’? ‘Cold’? ‘Merciless’?”

I freeze. “Yes. All of those.” And more.

Duo doesn’t withdraw his hand. In fact, he’s looking at me as if those very qualities are endearing. “That doesn’t scare me.”

Of course not. Duo knows what it takes to survive. To protect your interests. To look out for yourself. I look down at his hand and imagine applying those hard-fought and tragically-learned lessons to our survival, to protecting our interests, to looking out for us.
I’ve never had a partner before, but Duo knows that and he’s willing to show me how it works.

I capture his hand, interlace our fingers, lean forward for a chaste kiss. Then another. And another. Duo pulls me toward him and himself toward me. Our chests brush.

Then Duo does more than simply permit my mouth to touch his; he kisses me back, his hot tongue flicking against my lips and I want more. I chase after him until he relents, sucking and nipping at my mouth until my belly is tingling with warmth.

He pulls away, not far enough to make me come after him, but far enough to say, “Don’t let me do anything you don’t want, OK, Tro?”

My pulse spikes; he’s not about to roll onto his other side, tuck himself against me, and go to sleep. This isn’t stopping. Unless I want it to.

I don’t.

And as for him doing something I’ll object to—

“You won’t.” I promise, slanting my mouth over his, sighing softly when his lips part, gasping sharply when his tongue brushes against mine. I’ve never felt arousal like this before, so hot and overwhelming that the fabric of my shirt makes my skin itch. I want it off. Now.

I ask Duo if it’s all right. His hands provide the answer, reaching for the hem and lifting. The garment disappears over the side of the bed and Duo’s weight settles against me. I lie back — cool, smooth sheets against my bare skin — and I urge Duo to rest against me.

“Like this?” he whispers, his hand over my heart and one thigh slanted on top of mine. I spread my legs and his knee finds a niche between my thighs.

“Like this?” I check.

He nods. I lean up for a kiss, my hands supporting his head. Dear God, his mouth is the most luscious thing I’ve ever tasted. He’s so quiet, silent, but that’s all right. So am I.

I pull back, kiss him softly, nibble at his lip—the upper first, then the lower—and he gasps when I suck gently. I can feel him now, hardening against my hip, but my hands stay where they are, cradling his face, my thumbs brushing his cheeks. I tilt his face up a bit so I can press my lips to his jaw, paint his skin with tiny licks and the soft scrape of teeth.

Over my heart, his hand twitches.

I back away.

“More,” he demands before I can ask if he’s all right.

I nuzzle his throat and his hips rub against me in a single thrust, his hard length still trapped inside his underwear and pants.

He pulls back. “Sorry. I just—”

“It’s OK,” I murmur, kissing his neck softly.

He’s panting a bit now, leaning toward my mouth, angling his body against me. God, he’s so warm. Every little shiver I coax from him only makes the air between us hotter. I nip his ear, draw the lobe between my lips and suckle.
His hips roll again. His hand moves over my chest and I gasp as his fingertips brush over peaked flesh. He pinches lightly. A soft twist. My hips rock against his thigh. My breaths come hard and fast against his neck.

“Tro?” he breathes.

“Hm?”

“My shirt, too?”

I do what I can to assist, but my hands fumble with it, anticipation making me clumsy. And then his bare chest is leaning against mine. I haven’t been given the opportunity to touch so much of his bare skin since the day I’d pulled him from the frigid shower spray and, as my hand curls over his shoulder, my mind blanks. He shrugs himself closer to me and my fingers trail over and along his back. He presses his lips to my throat and I take that for encouragement, wrapping both arms around him, rubbing up and down over his skin as his spine bows and his hips thrust against me again.

His hot mouth moves along my neck. Breaths and delicate licks and the edge of teeth. His hand on my chest, rubbing circles, plucking gently, the flick of a nail. I thrust up against him, one hand on his waist and the other at the back of his neck.

Ah, Duo.

The soft shush of skin and sheets and fabric. The feel of his hands, his skin, his shifting muscles. I seek out his mouth with mine. His tongue slips softly between my lips and I moan.

Please.

His hips roll again and again and again. I bend my far knee, angle myself deeper into his weight and heat, and answer with slow, deliberate thrusts of my own.

He pulls back far enough to ask, “This OK? Like this?”

“Very.” My hands search over his back and my lips nibble at his jaw, the space below his ear, the line of his jugular.

His fingers dance over my chest and his other hand clamps down on my shoulder and I’m so hard and he’s so perfect. I give him a slow, wet kiss along his throat, exhale against his damp skin. His whole torso bows with the sensation.

“Again,” he pants.

I do it again, just a little lower.

His hips move faster. “Tro.”

I answer. “Duo.”

He finds completion with a harsh gasp, surging against me in slower and slower passes as the rush fades.

I roll against him, my own release is so close—after seeing him overtaken—the sheer sensuality of it—he’d looked and felt so-so-so—I’m so very close.

Duo pets my chest, leans in, kisses me. His hot tongue slips along and between my parted lips. I mewl, grab his hip to hold him steady as I want and need-need-need–!
Oh! Oh–Duo–hn–so–oh, so good.

So very, very good.

Flushed and tingling in the wake, I blink and breathe and simply be.

“Duo,” I thank him, unable to gather enough breath to say more than his name. I nudge his lips with mine, give him a single, clinging kiss. His hands frame my face. Mine hold his steady.

We’ll have to get up, get cleaned up, and change our clothes, but he doesn’t seem to be in a rush, so neither am I. He melts against me, his head on my shoulder. My hands rove lazily over his bare back. The gentle glow that permeates us pushes back the darkness. I close my eyes and tingle, warm on the inside in a way that no amount of hot coffee could manage.

“D’you think we can really do this?” he asks, his breath puffing against my collarbone.

I reach up to massage his scalp through the weave of his hair. “We have been. For a few weeks now.”

He leans up on an arm. I meet his expectant look.

I clarify, “I liked it. A lot. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“Yeah. I get that. I don’t get why you came here looking for me in the first place, but I get that.”

“I’ll tell you,” I promise. “Later?”

Duo smirks. “You’re feeling the aftereffects right about now, too, huh?”

Indeed. But I offer to let him use the bathroom first. He kisses me with surprising enthusiasm, grabs his bag, and leaves the door partially open. While he’s in there, I use the bedside tissues to clean up as best I can. My pants are salvageable, but the underwear are a lost cause.

Duo comes out and chuck his bag into an armchair. I go in and wash up with a spare cloth and dry off with an extra hand towel. Change underwear. Redress in my trousers.

I step back into the room and come up short. The bed is empty. Duo’s bag is still on the chair. But where is Duo? Oh, no. Please—

Dropping my duffel, I check the door — it’s still locked from the inside. I force myself to take a long, hard look at the room, identify all blind spots. I find Duo in one of them. He has wedged himself between the far side of the bed and the dresser, his shoulders pressing against the wall. His eyes are squeezed shut.

“Are you injured?” I demand, my voice sharper than I’d intended.

He shakes his head.

I crouch down on the cold floor and reach for him. His hands catch mine, hold me back and away. “It’s still there,” he rasps. I wait for him to take another breath. “I don’t deserve—after what I’ve done—how can I have this?”

He opens his eyes and the look he gives me is frenzied.

I coax him, “Come here. Into my arms. Let me give it to you.”
He makes a sound in the back of his throat like a mewl from a frightened kitten. I reaffirm my grip on his hands and pull. I get him standing. I get him under the covers. I get him tucked up against me. This is all I can do for him. All I dare to do. Anything more pleasant will push away the darkness, yes, but the darkness will not be denied. Only delayed. And the further we push it away, the harder it will push back.

Oh, Duo. His psyche is a battle ground and this is a fight I can’t help him win.

It’s clear to me now what Duo truly needs: absolution.

I’d seen the same drive in Heero during the war. He hadn’t fought it, hadn’t let it twist him up inside. He hadn’t even waited to be fully healed before he’d offered the loaded gun to each and every person he’d mistakenly taken a family member from at the New Edwards Base. Sylvia Noventa had come the closest to actually shooting him. I’d watched from a distance. Admired Heero’s cold, analytical logic: a life for a life. He’d found a reason to keep fighting after that.

I turn my thoughts to the man in my arms, rub my chin against the coil of his braid where it had piled between us, and I feel genuine terror at the thought of Duo following Heero’s example.

How can I watch as Duo confesses his crimes, providing the grieving family — Duo’s own family — with the proverbial gun, and then waits for the shot?

I can’t. There must be another way to give Duo the absolution he needs. All I have to do is figure out how.

Chapter End Notes

The song quoted is “Everything” by Alanis Morissette from her 2004 album: “So-Called Chaos.”

If I’m remembering the series right, Trowa does indeed taxi Heero around Europe in a truck so that Heero can offer vengeance to the surviving family members of the Alliance pacifists that he’d mistakenly killed. Sylvia Noventa goes as far as to grab the gun he offers her and point it at him.
I find Duo in the church storage room.

Leaning on the door frame, I cross my arms and let my lips curl into a smirk. “I see you’re still in the closet.”

His hands, buried deep in his backpack, pause. He blinks. Rolls his eyes. Snorts. “There’s room for you, too.”

There certainly is, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to tempt fate. Or myself. It has taken every bit of my ability just to concentrate today. The crew had brought the church’s order of molded furniture after lunch and it astounds me that I hadn’t dropped a single one of the new pews on my foot. Flashes from last night bombard me at the worst possible moments. Duo’s bare, muscled arms and torso. The inviting arch of his neck beneath my mouth. His soft gasp and groan. The flick of his nail over my nipple. The heat and taste of his mouth as his tongue had slid between my lips…

I shiver, and not because the church furnace hasn’t been activated yet.

Duo glances up from where he’s kneeling on the floor and the look in his eyes makes me forget about the ever-present chill of this colony. He pulls a hand from his bag and holds out the bottle of whiskey.

“Last chance,” he offers, waggling the sloshing liquor at me.

I grimace, lifting a hand in silent refusal. However, the contents of the bottle capture my attention. My eyes narrow as I measure the amount still remaining. The bottle is a little over half-full.

I stare at Duo. “How much of that did you drink?”

“None, today.”

I cut across his smirk with a gesture. “Not today. You know when.”

“Oh. Uh, I had a little.”

“A little,” I repeat, thinking of that Saturday night. Truth-or-and-drink. “You let me drink nearly half the bottle?”
“Um, I guess I did.”

I glare.

He shrugs helplessly. “What can I say? You were totally right. It tastes like shit.”

I close my eyes, lean my head back against the door frame, and chuckle. Unbelievable. With a sigh and a shake of my head, I return my attention to him, frowning when he places the whiskey on one of the shelves that we had installed this morning before the furniture delivery. He slides the bottle over toward a large first aid kit.

“For medicinal purposes,” he explains with a waggle of his brows.

“That’s about all it’s good for,” I concur and then think to add, “external use only.”

“Ha. No kidding.” Duo reaches back into his back and pulls out his bottle of sanitize gel. It’s almost full. He sets it on the shelf as well. A metallic clink precedes the appearance of his cook-set. He places that in a seemingly random spot and then reaches for the empty water jug. By the time he picks up the camp roll at his feet, I’ve figured out what he’s doing.

I drag my duffel bag away from the corner I’d tucked it into and lighten my load as well. The reverend will undoubtedly find a use for the cook-set and sanitize gel. More so than I will after today. Picking up my sleeping bag, I think of all the nights I’d shared its embrace with Duo, but I don’t hesitate to wedge it onto the top shelf beside Duo’s.

“You don’t have to leave it behind,” he tells me.

His eyes are focused on my sleeping bag and I hunt for one good reason to keep it, but nothing outweighs the truth: “Jamesson’s kids might need it.”

Duo’s throat works. “Yeah,” he agrees, looking down. With a deep breath and forceful sigh, he scoops up his deflated bag. It bounces against his back when he swings it over his shoulder. It only holds his clothes and Kurt Franklin’s diary now.

I loop the duffel strap over my chest.

Duo moves toward the open doorway.

I reach out and snag his hand. He stops. We stare into each other. The light from the new windows spills over him. His hair has even more gold in it today thanks to a thorough washing the night before.

I want to tell him that he’s done a good thing here. He’s leaving a legacy that has a chance of lasting and making a difference. He should be proud of all he’s accomplished. If I’d had the right to it, I’d be proud of him.

I open my mouth.

“I know, Tro,” he says. His mouth tightens in a fleeting, strained smile and I let the words go. He doesn’t need to hear it now. Maybe later. If he ever needs to be reminded, I’ll tell him.

Brushing my thumb over his knuckles, I drop his hand. I close the storage room door and we follow the sounds of voices and the chugging of an engine to the main entrance. Reverend Jamesson is standing on the steps, waving farewell to the guys. Ron, Matt, and Jack wave back. The recycle center’s delivery truck grumbles. The gears grind.
We’d already exchanged the standard well wishes — bad dates and blow-up dolls optional, of course — but I lift a hand anyway.

“I could not have done this without you both,” Jamesson insists with quiet certainty. “Thank you J.D. Thank you T.W.”

Duo accepts the outstretched hand. “Duo Maxwell,” he corrects, startling the reverend. “My name’s Duo Maxwell.”

“My goodness,” the man breathes.

Before he can do more than look my way, I offer, “Trowa Barton.”

He shakes my hand, bemused. “Not one but two war heroes. Remarkable.”

“Nah,” Duo humbugs. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Just your garden-variety crazy,” I insist.

Jamesson chuckles. Duo sends a smile my way. Though we’ve reached an ending, I’m happy. Surprisingly happy and content.

“One more piece of advice?” Duo offers the man.

“Yes, of course. Anything you feel is worth mentioning.”

Duo turns slightly to scan the curving streets of the colony, his gaze lingering on the res-den. “In the days and weeks to come, you’re gonna be tested over and over. Just be smart. Think before you answer questions. Keep the secrets that will keep you and the church safe. If anyone from the res-den asks you about the folk you’ve met or the places you’ve seen there, don’t say too much. Jebb, Darl, Morisa, and Pinky want to trust you. You can do a lot of good with that.”

“I will.” Jamesson looks from me to Duo again. “I don’t suppose…” He pauses, studies our expressions, and doesn’t ask us if we’d consider attending his first sermon. Neither Duo nor I had said as much, but it seems that the reverend has figured it out: we can’t stay any longer than we already have. “You two will be sorely missed.”

“Me? Missed? Nah, I don’t think so,” Duo downplays. “You’ll miss Tro’s witty one-liners, though, eh?”

He elbows me in the side and I affect a long-suffering sigh. “How many times do I have to tell you — I don’t squeak when you poke me.”

Duo pokes me again. “One of these days, it’ll happen,” he predicts. “You can’t argue with quantum science.”

“You can’t win, either.”

The prospect doesn’t put Duo off. Of course not. “That’s the beauty of the quantum realm, Tro. All possibilities are true until scientific verification eliminates all but one outcome.” Poke.

I return poke with a sudden jab of my fingers right where I know for a fact that he’s ticklish.

He jerks, twists, and squeaks.

I grin. “Hm. What are the odds.”
The reverend laughs.

Duo shrugs off my victory. “Well, that’s one universal mystery solved. I guess we’ll call it a day.” He gives the church one last look, throwing back his shoulders and inhaling deeply. “So this is where we part ways, Reverend.”

“Call if you need us,” I invite, giving him the name of the circus. It should be easy enough for him to find the contact details from that.

“But we’re counting on you not to get into too much trouble by yourself,” Duo cautions. His lips are smiling, but his eyes are serious.

I play off of the remark with a droll warning, “Don’t make us turn the shuttle around.”

Again, Jamesson laughs. I can see why Duo cracks so many jokes. Enjoys it. It’s not unlike playing to a larger audience for the sake of their awe and applause.

And just like at the circus, there comes a moment when it’s time to step back from the stage and let the show go on without you.

Duo jogs down the steps. I follow, matching his strides when we hit the ground. Out of the corner of my eye, I see his shoulders twitch. He’s fighting the urge to curl up around the pain. Despite my respect and fondness for the reverend, I wish he would get on with his day; I can still feel his gaze on us and it prevents me from wrapping an arm around Duo like he needs me to, like I need me to.

Almost as an afterthought, Jamesson calls out to us, “May you have God’s blessing!”

Duo stumbles, his shoulder bouncing against mine and to hell with appearances. I grab for his opposite shoulder, give it a squeeze, and clamp down tight. I wave back in acknowledgment of the send-off.

“Ten paces to the alleyway,” I tell Duo.

He nods. His eyes are closed. Shit. He isn’t even watching where he’s going.

We make it to the alley and I pull him into a shadow. He’s shuddering and I haul him so close that when I inhale, it squeezes the breath from his lungs. His hands grab the fabric of the back of my shirt. He holds on. We breathe in compliment: like melody and harmony.

Eventually, he calms. Eventually, his knees support him. Eventually, I let him pull away.

“We have to go,” he reminds me, voice gravelly.

I know we do. I lead him back to Main Street. In the general direction of the space port and into the overpriced business hotel.

A different clerk is working at the front desk. I get us a room. Duo peruses the visitor information corner like he’s hunting for a fried circuit board in a shuttle control panel. I scoop up our pair of key cards. Duo jabs the elevator call button. Bounces on the balls of his feet waiting for the doors to open.

As we ride downward into the economy lodging, Duo leans a shoulder against mine. He doesn’t complain about the waste of money; that’s how I know what a monumental effort it requires for him to put one foot in front of the other. We could have gone directly to the space port. We should have. But he needs to let this out before he figures out how to bury the pain deep down where, little by
little, it will tear him to pieces.

The elevator doors open. A clean, spartan hallway stretches out on either side. I follow the directions on the posted placard toward our room. Scan the card, usher him inside, safe. Once we’re within, I let him drift from me. There’s no window, of course. Or even the illusion of one. A single abstract plastic artwork hangs on the wall. The double bed has sharp-looking, angular edges. Comfort is not a priority for guests here. That’s fine. We won’t be here long, just long enough.

Duo leans back against the lightweight desk. The monitor on the wall above it is dark, reflecting the slight quiver of his shoulders. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was high on zipline. But I do know better. He’s fighting his inner darkness.

I consider going to him, but as we’re locked in this cramped space together, I can afford to give him a little distance. He’s not going anywhere. Neither am I. When he’s ready, I’ll be right here.

I drop my bag on the gray-on-gray paisley bedspread and take a seat on the foot of the mattress. Keeping my eyes on him, I lean down to unknot the laces on my boots before toeing them off. I kick them to the side.

I want him in my arms. I want to push his pain away. I want it to leave him free to take whatever he wants from life.

This morning at the inn, we’d woken up tangled around each other, helplessly aroused, and all I could do was sigh with regret. Even now, as I sit on a mattress that isn’t as soft as the one at the inn had been—but despite that it is still a bed—how can I not regret the missed opportunity to be his lover? How can I not resent the guilt that makes it impossible for him to let me offer that escape from the pain?

Can I kiss him so long as we don’t go too far? Can I hold onto him so long as neither one of us enjoys it too much?

I remember an embrace that had actually done him — had done us both — some good. I arrange myself so that I’m sitting Indian-style and wonder if he’ll take me up on it.

“Shit, Tro,” he breathes. He pushes his bangs out of his eyes with the palm of one unsteady hand. Sighs heavily. Mutters, “Is it ever going to stop hurting?”

Studying his pained expression, I plan my well-meaning assault. He’s hurting, yes, but more important than the how of relieving it, is another question:

“Do you want it to?” I challenge.

Duo chokes. Gapes. Is fully as incredulous as I’ve ever seen him. “What the hell kind of question is that? Of course I want it to stop!”

Anger, good. That’s something I can work with. I give Duo a long look. I’ve seen enough broken, bitter men in my life who had embraced the pain rather than risk going on without it. He needs to know that could be his future. “Sometimes the pain is all you think you have left of the times that mean the most to you.”

Duo frowns slightly, but not in confusion. He knows exactly what I mean. “So you hold onto the pain so you won’t forget. So you won’t feel like you’re betraying their memory.”

“But because it’s all you’ve got, and it’s all you can feel, because it’s yours and you don’t want to lose that, because it’s familiar, because that’s how you punish yourself and that’s all you can bear to
let yourself feel. There are a million reasons.”

Duo doesn’t reply this time. He’s watching me. I watch him back.

I say, “All you need is one good reason to let it go.” I hold out my hand.

His mouth twitches. “Yeah,” Duo agrees, his voice thick.

He shifts away from the desk, hesitates, and then crosses the short distance to take my hand. He kneels onto the stiff mattress and I open up a space for him, wrap him up in my arms and legs.

“You’re pretty flexible,” he observes after a minute of silence.

I hum, amused. “You think so, huh?”

“One of these days, I’m gonna know so,” he asserts and I thrill at his rallying spirit. Somehow, he’s going to get through this darkness. And when that happens, when he starts to genuinely heal, I’ll be there. He expects I’ll be there.

I grin. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Hm,” he agrees, ducking his head and butting against my shoulder.

Does he want to kiss me as badly as I want to kiss him? I tilt my head back to put a little more space between us.

Duo squirms around. With his back to my chest and his hands grasping my arms, he speaks, “I thought helping to build Jamesson’s place might help me see the Maxwell Church the way it used to be, before...” Duo pauses, swallows. His breath trips out on a wobbly sigh. “But whenever I think of it, all I see—I still see it in smoking rubble and debris. In the end, all I did was remind myself of the loss.”

He leans forward and, bracing his elbows against his thighs, cradles his face in his hands. I grip his shoulders, tethering him.

“May you have God’s blessing,” he whispers. “That’s the last thing Sister Helen said to me before she died.”

I listen as Duo forces a great, calming breath into his lungs and I listen to the shuddering exhalation that follows. He’s collapsing. By now, I know the signs.

I don’t say a word. I curl an arm around his shoulders and pull him down beside me on top of the cheap bed cover. I’m spooning behind Duo, as usual. If hiding his face from me will allow him to bleed out just a little more pain, so be it. I keep one arm around him and wait.

He holds his breath. I alternate between hugging him to me and rubbing his back until he exhales through his mouth and the sound is wet. He’s crying. I listen to him snuffle. I feel him shift as he wipes at his face with his shirt cuffs. I’d offer mine, but that would only make him feel self-conscious.

“I miss her,” he suddenly whispers.

I nod against his shoulder, moved by the fact that Duo is able to let me be this close, to know and see this much, after he’s suffered so many losses.

Duo Maxwell is the strongest person I’ve ever known.
“Now what happens?” he grates out. My own vocal chords ache in sympathy for all the sobs he’d held back.

“How?” I ask. “What do you mean?”

“I mean…” He’s holding his breath again. “You gonna go back to the circus now?”

I close my eyes and take a moment to inhale the scent of Duo’s hair. “I was thinking about it.”

He’s very quiet. Barely breathing. “Oh.”

I elaborate, “Something’s bothering Cathy.”

“How?” It’s a tiny sound, but Duo’s voice breaks it right in two.

“Something’s bothering you.”

Duo swallows audibly. “Uh...”

I shift out from behind him and find myself being frowned at by a Duo with reddened eyes, tear-stained cheeks, and a snotty nose. God, do I love him. “Where do you want to go next?”

Duo tries — and fails — to sell me a nonchalant shrug. I’ve surprised him and his lopsided grin is forced. “Not sure. Maybe I’ll see what shuttles are available for tomorrow or—”

“There’s one that leaves for Earth — Rome — at eight-forty tonight.”

Duo scowls. “How do you—?”

“How’s not well and we were running out of time. I checked the schedule when I called her yesterday.”

“Oh.” Duo studies my face in the dimming light. I’m so busy hunting after the brief flickers of thought, so focused on trying to puzzle him out, that I miss the obvious.

He nods. “Yeah. OK. Thanks for everything, Tro. You’re right; I can manage on my own now. So you should go back and see what’s wrong with Cathy and I’ll...”

Duo’s words trail off when my fingertips settle against his lips.

Why is he so damn stubborn and exasperating and determined to be super-human? I say through a half-smile, “I asked where you wanted to go, Duo, so I’d know which flight to book. That wasn’t a goodbye.”

“It—but—what the hell are you even—?” He stops. Closes his eyes. Sighs. Mumbles against my fingers, “OK. Fine. Stalk me some more why don’t you.”

“I think I will, thanks very much.” I lift my hand away and tell him, “Howard says there’s a job waiting for you. If you want it.”

“If I can keep a lid on it,” he grumbles and we both know he’s talking about his nightmares. He still has them. They creep up on him now, slithering between us. More than once, his bodily jerk and gasp has shocked me awake in the dead of night. I always manage to get us both back to sleep, but it goes faster if Duo lets himself feel the pain instead of forcing it back down. I’ve told him this and, more and more, he’s giving in to it, taking deep gulping breaths in the middle of the night to bleed out a little of the agony. Primarily for my sake so that I don’t spend half the night massaging his
neck and shoulders; I’m mercenary enough to play the guilt card if it has a chance of benefiting him in the long run.

“I’m a fair mechanic,” I tell Duo. “Are rations normally pretty tight on Howard’s ship?”

“Rations? Nah, but—” Duo tilts his head to the side and really looks at me. “You’d spend weeks on end stuck in the hull of a wreck-raiser? You get that engine grease never comes off completely, right? It gets down around your nails and the knuckle creases and shit?”

“Engine grease, huh? That could be a deal breaker,” I tease with a perfectly flat tone.

“Weeks between shore leave,” Duo continues, a grin shaking loose. “Have you ever even worked on a big ship before?”

“Nope.”

“You’re gonna get sea sick.”

“I’ll never get sick of seeing you.”

He rolls his eyes at my cheesy line. “No water pressure in the damn shower, which is lukewarm most of the time at best. The bunks smell like sweaty armpit and—”

“Here’s an idea,” I interrupt. “Come to the circus with me instead.”

Duo blinks. “Instead?”

“Uh-hm. We can scrape up lion shit, get yelled at by the manager, scrub cotton candy, dried soda pop, and bubble gum off of the bleachers…” I waggle my brows.

Duo accuses through narrowed eyes, “You’re just in it for the turds.”

I’m so transparent. “Or we can try both and then decide which path will…” I pause, inhale with mock resignation, and deadpan, “lead us to wondrous treasures beyond our wildest dreams.”

“Dude. Please. Try and contain the excitement.”

I stare at him.

“What?” he bleats.

“I’m containing the excitement.”

He rolls his eyes. “I said ‘try’ not, y’know, actually pull it off.”

“I see.”

Duo and I share a look. I invite him, “Come with me.”


“Yes.” I shrug. “I need to see Cathy. You don’t have anywhere you absolutely have to be right now. So... come with me.”

“You wanna take me to the circus?” Duo inquires, a cocky grin beginning to curve his lips.
“I’ll even share my trailer with you,” I promise.

Duo laughs. “If you can say the magic word, it’s a date.”

Before he’s finished speaking, I blurt, “Please?”

With a soft grin, Duo reaches up and glides the very tips of his fingers over my temple and into my hair. “Sure thing.”

“Thank you.”

“For what, man?”

“For agreeing to come with me.” Of course.

Duo snorts softly. “It’s as you say, Tro. I haven’t got anywhere else I need to be.”

In reply, I just grin. Like an idiot, I’m sure.

Cocking his head to one side, Duo adopts a speculative expression. “Doesn’t Cathy hate me?”

“What? Cathy doesn’t hate you.”

“Strongly dislike?”

I shake my head. “Why do you ask?”

“The last time I saw her,” he reminds me, “was right after you lost your memory. She seemed… oh, ever so slightly less than thrilled to see me.”

I sigh. “You know, sometimes, I think she really thinks she’s my older sister, the way she acts. She was just trying to protect me from getting hurt.” I’d been a complete and miserable mess when she’d bumped into me that day in the street. A half-drowned rat looking for his next meal. “She doesn’t hate you, Duo,” I repeat deliberately so that there can be no misunderstandings.

“Hm,” Duo says, nodding. “OK, then. If you say so.”

“I do.”

A moment pulses between us, silent but stirring. Duo is gazing up at me, relaxed and trusting, and I’m leaning over him, contemplating his soft lips. I sense the moment Duo’s gaze mirrors mine. My lips tingle under the attention and I want to kiss him. More than anything. I want him to want this, not just give in to it. I want him to reach for me. Just one touch — one hand on my cheek or one fist tangled in my shirt, I’m not particular — and I’ll know he feels it. Deep down. He’ll know that he has me. He’ll know that he can have me. That I’m his.

But he doesn’t move and the silence grows awkward.

I sit up and reach across the narrow pathway between the bed and the ledge under the monitor. I grab the remote. When the colony information site comes up, I easily navigate to the space port screen. Spying the Flight Reservations option, I say needlessly, “I’ll book our tickets, then.”

“And warn Cathy,” Duo adds with a grin, playing along, pretending that last moment hadn’t happened.

“Yeah,” I agree, selecting two neighboring seats on the half-full, evening shuttle. “Since we both
know how much she *loves* you."

"Turd," Duo accuses, not moving from his sprawled position. He still has his boots on.

I flick his ankle. "That's *fish* turd to you."

Duo laughs.

Chapter End Notes

In the final third of the series, Cathy literally bumps into Trowa on the street somewhere after Trowa’s accident in space. He’s suffering from amnesia and appears to have nothing but the clothes on his back. She tells him she’s his older sister, takes him back to the circus, and looks after him. When Duo (and, later, Quatre) shows up, she is extremely protective of Trowa, who — poor dude — has no clue what’s going on. Duo coming back to the circus with Trowa now in this fic will be the first time he’s seen Cathy since she told him to get out and leave Trowa alone. So, just a little awkward.

I imagine that Trowa saw many emotionally broken men during his time spent with the mercenaries, though there’s nothing from the series that I can point to as an inspiration (except for Trowa’s zero tolerance for bullshit, perhaps). In Episode Zero, the captain has lost his right eye at some point (more on this later), so clearly there were risks of personal injury.

As for the hotel, I imagine that the cheapest rooms on a colony would be below ground. Since land is in very limited supply on colonies, the street-level part of the building would be relatively small. The number of floors that a building could be built “skyward” would depend on the size of the colony and they’d have the same square footage as the street-level “ground” floor (if not less) so that would really limit the number of guests a hotel could accommodate, but there’s the possibility of having several large underground levels with dozens of rooms. I’d say that the above-ground rooms with windows (or even balconies) would be a lot more expensive.

Speaking of windows, I don’t think any businesses or homes would have windows facing out into space. Too risky. It’s harder to guarantee safety and proper maintenance when it comes to private property, so I think if there is a window that looks out at space, it’s probably at an observation deck in the space port and that’s it. Just a little of my colony architecture logic there. (In the series, when Duo remarks that the Moon looks like a graveyard from space, I assume he’s seen it from a porthole on a Sweepers’ ship and not from his home colony.)
Trowa has been asleep for ten solid hours. I’d tried to get some shut-eye, but it makes me twitchy when I can’t be in the cockpit. Yeah, so long as I’ve got the controls just a reflex away and I’m surrounded by sensors scanning for trouble, I can totally nod off. But stick my ass in the passenger section and all I can think is, “Phew! One more space mine we didn’t kiss. That was a close one.”

Of course I know that there are no minefields out here. Not anymore. I get that. But, obviously, it hasn’t really sunk in yet.

So I bounce my knee. I flip through the duty-free catalog and sneer at the overpriced, ridiculously useless shit-and-what on the glossy pages. I stare past Trowa’s sweater-draped shoulder and out the porthole. I think about all the places I’ve been on Earth – not what I’d done or hadn’t done there. I keep it abstract. The terrain. The weather. The smell of civilization versus the aroma of the wilderness.

For the first hour or two of our flight, I’d been keeping myself occupied by cajoling the kid across the aisle to put his book down and play “I Spy.” It had taken a little time and a lot of wisecracks, but I’d gotten a couple of games out of him.

He’s conked out now, sprawled against the woman beside him. His mother, I’d bet. And a busy woman going by the fact that she’s still typing away at her laptop. With even more determination now that we’re moments away from re-entry. She must have one hell of a deadline.

I wiggle in my seat, rubbing my shoulder against Trowa’s, and I open my mouth to tell him we’re about to start plowing through the atmosphere, but the low whine of the engines suddenly goes all loud and squealy, stealing my thunder. As they say.

Trowa sits up straight, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

I shake my head on a sigh. “You know, if you didn’t wanna play ‘I Spy,’ you could’ve just said so.”

“Didn’t want to get in the way of your mission,” he murmurs. The one eye I can see glints with a hint of humor.

“Dude. We gotta work on socializing you. ‘I Spy’ is, like, ten times more fun when you’ve got more people.”

Trowa shrugs. “I’m not very competitive. And I don’t think your new friend is, either.”

I give him a look prompting him to explain that.
He nods across the aisle to the boy’s abandoned book and his workaholic mother.

“OK, yeah. That’s one point for observational shit.”

“Double or nothing,” Trowa says in a monotone that I’ve learned is how he likes to package wit. “He even looks a little like Heero.”

Holy hell. He’s totally right. I gape at the messy, dark hair and round face. The kid’s eyes are brown and he wears glasses, but yeah. I can see it now. Huh. Maybe that hint of someone familiar is what had compelled me to make such a pest of myself. I smirk. Pestered Heero. Those were good times.

Trowa shifts beside me, drawing my attention. He says, “I’m sorry he didn’t understand.”

“Eh,” I dismiss. “Doesn’t matter, Tro. It all worked out OK in the end.”

Trowa’s eyes narrow. “He should have taken point when you needed him to.”

I jerk back and take stock of Tro’s sudden tension. “Are you, like... mad at him?”

“Yes.”

I blink. “Well... shit.” How unbelievable is this? I’m in a position to defend Heero Yuy to Trowa Barton. They’d been like two escapees in a double-evac pod from what I’d heard. “Look, Tro, Heero’s a great guy to have at your back when bullets are flying, but he’s not exactly an expert on interpersonal communication, you know?”

I fidget. “Besides, I chickened out. I couldn’t tell him what was really going on with me and I think he knew it.” I might just have hurt him when I did that. “Hell, we’d been through a lot of shit together and I couldn’t be completely honest with him. I don’t really think he figured I’d take off like that. I bet he told me to deal with it on my own in order to push me into telling him why I couldn’t.” A crooked grin works its way into my little speech. “But it totally backfired on him.”

“It did,” Trowa agrees tersely. “So you think he was trying to help.”

“In his own sick-and-twisted little way, yeah, I do.”

Trowa nods.

“So... are you still mad at him?”

“Of course.”

I huff out a chuckle. “I never figured you one to hold a grudge over something as little as that.”

“Little?” Trowa returns, fixing his formidable half-stare on me. “It was important to you. It should have been more important to him.”

I straight-out gawp at him. “What’s with you? Why does this bother you so much? So, OK, Heero isn’t a candidate for the Friend of the Year Award, but so what? Everyone thinks he’s perfect but he’s not. Just because he happened to screw this up doesn’t make him—”

“Just when you started dosing up on zipline, I was asleep on Earth, dreaming about you,” Trowa interrupts, speaking not quite loud enough for me to hear over the screaming engines and roaring atmospheric resistance. It’s a good thing we can both read lips.
He continues, his words quick and precise, "I was dreaming that no one knew where you were. You were missing, and then when we found you — when you showed up at base — you wouldn’t wake up. There was something wrong with you and none of us knew how to fix it. And all I could do was just watch you while you slept and wonder where you were and if you would be coming back to me. To us, I mean."

He’s silent then. I study his face, dissecting the nuance that beckons me to ask, “Is it?”

“Is what?”

“You wanted me to come back to all you guys? Is that what you meant?”

He shakes his head. I’m somehow not surprised. Trowa doesn’t say what he doesn’t mean. But I get why he’d pull a Duo-Maxwell and backpedal. Hell, the whole scenario sounds crazy enough without that little detail.

Suddenly, I get it. All of it. “This is what you haven’t been telling me, isn’t it? That you... you dreamed about me.”

I’ve never seen Trowa look more uncomfortable. Again, he nods once.

“You came looking for me because of a dream?”

Trowa actually gulps. I can see his Adam’s apple dip. But he looks me in the eyes and says, “Yes.”

“But... it was just a dream.” I mean, the hell?

“Was it?” Trowa replies and I feel an inexplicable shiver. “I’d never had a dream like that, Duo. I’d never dreamed in such detail things that had never happened and...” He pauses for a moment.

“What would you have done?”

“I...” I give it a good think before admitting, “I would have called the circus to see how you were doing.”

“And when you found out that I’d taken off? That I’d been having nightmares so violent that I’d been waking up everyone within shouting distance? That I’d left to deal with it on my own?”

“Jesus,” I grumble. “You make it sound like I was one step away from blowing my brains out.”

Trowa is silent. So am I.

I clear my throat. “C’mon. Gimme some credit. Getting jetisoned into space is totally the way to go.”

As soon as the words come out, I realize what I’ve said.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I’m a brainless moron.”

Trowa shudders visibly and — to hell with re-entry safety regulations — I slide my arm behind his shoulders.

“I still have nightmares about that,” he surprises me by admitting. “But not so much lately.”

“Yeah? Chewing on my hair helps?”

“It’s a decent lifeline.”
I snort out a laugh and reach for his hand. The feel of Trowa’s long fingers threading between mine steals away my comeback.

He confesses, “I wasn’t going to tell you about the dream.”

“Why not?”

“Because it sounds...”

“Crazy?” I finish for him. I give him a helpless grin. “As if fighting a lost cause for the sake of the colonies isn’t?”

One corner of Trowa’s mouth kicks up. “So long as we understand each other.”

“We do, Tro,” I tell him, giving his hand a hard squeeze. “We really do.” Finally.

I tug him against my side. He leans into me. My grin is so wide it kinda makes my face hurt. We can take on the world, Tro and me. Or, a couple of nightmares, at least.

Thank God Cathy isn’t nearly as intimidating as I remember or I might have considered reneging.

“Trowa!” she exclaims, barely letting the guy finish getting out of the taxi before glomping him.

I do the man-thing and pay for shit. Tip the cabbie. Carry the bags. Yup, I am working it.

I even do the slow twirl-in-place routine as the cab putters off. It’s the best I can do to give them a moment. Cathy’s relief is so painfully obvious I don’t even have to look at her to confirm it.

“Hi, Cathy,” Trowa greets. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch him circle her shoulders with one arm. A half-hug. Weak. I’m gonna have to get him to work on this, too, it looks like. At least Cathy doesn’t seem to mind his low-key approach. He looks happy to see her, though. It’s in his shoulders, the way they relax and his back curves out of its military-esque posture.

Not that I’ve been studying him or anything.

OK. That’s bullshit. I totally have.

More like ogling, though. Lustful leering. That sort of thing. God, how I wish I could—

Cathy steps back and looks right at me. I feel my backbone snap to attention.

“Hello, Duo. It’s good to see you again.”

I don’t say anything about the last time we’d seen each other or how all this is under better circumstances now. I just smile and go with it. “Thanks, Cathy. Good to be here.”

“How was your flight? You look tired. Do you want something to eat?”

The sound Trowa makes is almost an exasperated chuckle, drawing Cathy’s attention back to him. “We’re fine,” he tells her then he takes a closer look. “Have you been sleeping since I last spoke to you?”

“Of course,” she tells him brightly. “But you know how busy things can get around here...”

“Hm,” he replies, obviously not convinced. “So everything’s all right?”
“Couldn’t be better,” Cathy assures him.

OK, so, I don’t know Cathy very well. Except that pissing her off is a bad idea. Which is a good thing to know. But. I know when I’m seeing forced smiles. I’d learned how to sense tension in people before I’d even started calling myself “Duo.” So, yeah, I know something’s off. Something pretty damn big.

But I don’t think Cathy’s gonna spit it out with me hovering.

Trowa reaches out a hand for his bag and I pass it to him. He doesn’t say anything as Cathy starts yammering on about whatever’s been doing shit and things since he left. Trowa uh-huh’s and hm’s as he leads the way to the trailer that I guess is his. It sure as hell looks better than the sad, sorry shitholes I’d offered him back on the colony.

It kinda pisses me off that I’d done such a piss-poor job of taking care of him. Trowa is aces as far as that goes. Well, maybe I can flip a switch here. Turn over a new leaf, as Earthlings say. I’m pretty good at reading people and maybe that’ll come in handy. I mean, something’s going on with Cathy. I could maybe help. Even if that means shutting up and staying the hell out of the way.

It is, to be totally honest, the very least I can do for the guy who had singlehandedly saved my life.

Chapter End Notes

Interestingly, at the end of the series, when Heero takes off to do shit on Libra, Trowa defends the move, basically saying he thinks Heero know what he’s doing. Duo’s the one who pipes up, asking the other pilots, “You really trust Heero, huh?” So, to me, it sounds like Trowa thinks Heero can do no wrong and Duo is the one to remind everyone that Heero’s only human and just as fallible as the rest of them.
Chapter Notes

Music Rec: “Come Undone” by The Used

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... TROWA ...

Duo Maxwell is a natural at circus life.

The manager, who barks at everyone, loves him. By the end of the week, I even see the man throw an arm around Duo’s shoulders. He’s just so thrilled to have a hustler with a gift for sleight-of-hand join up. But of course he is. He’s already trying to persuade Duo to do more sensational illusions under the big top, but Duo convinces him that he’s still far too rusty for anything that high-profile.

He builds his confidence at a table beside the souvenir stand across from the concessions booth. Duo’s specialty is card tricks and sleight-of-hand amusements for the really small children. They love it. And Duo always makes sure they get a small prize or a voucher for a treat, so the parents love it, too.

I envy him, sometimes. His natural charm. His ability to send strangers off with a smile. But when I tell him this, I get a glimpse of his sharp edges in reply, “Yeah, well, I don’t think they’ll be able to sell tickets to my screaming, puking, lose-my-shit nightmares.”

I freeze. “Do you still have them?”

We’ve been sharing a bunk in my trailer. There are three bunks, but we know better than to try sleeping apart. For the sake of everyone within earshot.

Duo’s shoulders slump. “Yeah. Sometimes.”

I scot closer. We’re in the mess tent and no one’s looking our way, but still. I refrain from doing more than bump my knee against his.

On a sigh, he tells me, “After an evening show. Pretty much every one so far.”

We have evening shows three times a week.

“Why haven’t you woken me?”

“I kinda do. You’re on autopilot, Tro.” He shrugs.

I’m just relieved that I do something. “Does it help?”

His laugh is soft, brief, and wry. His sidelong look is like a kiss. “You wake up every morning with me smothering you.”

I smile. That is true. If I don’t wake up due to Duo’s nightmares or my own, then it’s because a lock
of his hair has found its way into my mouth. I hadn’t been joking on the shuttle: that small dose of reality has called my mind back from the horrors of my past more than once. More often than not, I wake and promptly choke on and then spit out his hair. If he doesn’t mind that it’s a little damp, then I’m not going to apologize for it.

Duo concludes, “So, clearly, you’re doing something right.”

But that’s just it. I’m not. I have an inkling of what might help Duo overcome the worst of his terrors and I haven’t done a single thing about it.

I can’t keep putting it off. Duo needs this. More than he needs my help coaxing the old generators to run smoothly from show opening to closing. More than he needs a volunteer from the audience to assist with an illusion when he entertains the crowd between big top shows. Cathy would be better for that, anyway. The illusionist always has a young, beautiful assistant.

I sigh into my empty coffee cup.

“Tro?” he asks.

Bracing a hand on his shoulder, I stand up from my folding metal chair. “I’ll see you tonight.”

He nods. I don’t make eye contact with him. I can’t. He’ll know that I’m hiding something from him. Again. For now, he’ll only suspect. It’s the lesser evil.

I have an hour before I’m due to go over the trapeze routine with Boris and Alvina. I don’t even consider the circus’ decrepit communications trailer for what I need to do. I make the ten-minute walk down to the nearest Internet cafe, carefully considering everything I’ve learned about Duo’s past.

The bombing that had left a defenseless child alone on the streets.

The death of his friend and savior, Solo.

The dissipation of his gang; all the boys and girls that Duo had devoted himself to looking out for had found homes and left him behind at the church.

The deaths of Father Maxwell and Sister Helen, the only people he had willingly called parents…

Death and loss. So much of both. I don’t dare to liken his childhood to mine, to all my years of continually reinforced, enlightened self-interest. I’d been trained not to care about anyone other than myself. Duo had never learned that lesson.

It’s no surprise that ghosts dog his steps, darting from shadow-to-shadow in his wake. What’s truly remarkable is that, despite the weight he carries, he’d chosen to live. He’d chosen life, whatever that will be. Anyone else who had faced similar losses would have cowered in the shadow of Death, skittering nervously from one day to the next, hunted by fear. Not Duo.

During the war, he’d called himself the God of Death. Duo had become Death. He’d denied the soul-deep horror a foothold and guzzled from the fountain of rage and vengeance.

And where had that led him and left him? In a hell of heartache and fury.

What will it take to fully free him?

Well. That’s why I’m here, logging on to an out-dated terminal connected to the ESUN Intranet. I
draw in a slow, deep breath and type in the words: Captain Kurt Franklin United Earth Sphere Alliance. I hit the “enter” key a little harder than necessary.

The obituary is the first document on the short list of hits. I copy and paste the link in a new browser rather than click through. I scan the document and accept that Duo’s version of events is true: Kurt Franklin had died that night in A.C. 192 in the explosion that had obliterated the base; his remains had been matched to his Alliance DNA profile.

My hands fist on either side of the keyboard. I had not wanted it to be true. For Duo’s sake, I’d hoped it was all a misunderstanding. But it isn’t. Duo had killed his father. There is no debating that now.

I take a moment. Take a fortifying breath, close my eyes, accept the facts. When I return my attention to the computer screen, I’m ready for the next part. I know what comes next. Thanks to Heero, I can anticipate it.

I don’t like it. In fact, I hate it. Because I know that, one day, Duo is going to ask: “I was wondering if he—Kurt Franklin—has any family left…”

And when I ask why, he’ll say, “I have to tell them everything.”

Just like Heero had had to offer his own life up to the kin of the men he’d mistakenly killed at New Edwards. Every Alliance pacifist — obliterated in an instant.

My hands are shaking as I continue my search. This is the second time I’ve looked into this. The colony cluster database of L2 had returned no results and a sweep of easily hacked, not-so-confidential resident records had been equally unproductive except to assure me that Kurt Franklin’s relatives, if any still remain, do not live in L2. It’s no surprise; the majority of Alliance soldiers had been Earth-born.

Now that I’m back, I should be able to satisfy my curiosity in mere moments.

A couple dozen keystrokes later, I have my answer. I’m dismayed to read that Kurt Franklin does indeed have close relatives. A few. One small family. I memorize their names, birth dates, locations, occupations.

With one well-timed, homemade car bomb, I could answer Duo’s question — when he asks if anyone exists to whom he owes the right of vengeance — I could answer very honestly, “No.”

Just that simply, Duo would be safe.

Until nightfall.

I lower my head to my hands and blow out a hot, harsh breath.

I can’t kill these people. They’re not just Kurt Franklin’s family; they’re Duo’s family.

They are the only ones who can forgive him.

But if Duo gives a full confession to them — and he will, he won’t spare a single detail, he won’t be able to, not if he has any hope of finally defeating the horror within himself — if Duo confesses all, he will give these people the means to destroy him.

We’d all been officially absolved of our acts during the war, but this… this attack had been committed years before the colonies had declared war on the United Earth Sphere Alliance.
The authorities could become involved and evidence produced from databases and warehouses. Duo could face prosecution. Prison.

Something like this — even though Duo had been only twelve years old at the time — it could carry a life sentence.

No. Just… no.

I take another deep breath. I’ll find a way to sort this out. I’m not going to lose Duo. Not like that.

My prepaid hour hasn’t expired yet, but I have to leave or I’ll be late for practice. I erase my user history and emerge from the smoky cafe. The fresh air feels cleansing, but it’s an illusion. A vague promise that might be possible. Like finding the little red ball under the correct tea cup. It’s one of Duo’s most popular tricks.

Now I’m faced with a cosmic version of it where the prize is Duo’s future.

I’ll only have one chance to get it right.

I square my shoulders as I begin the hike back to the fairgrounds. I need more information. I may need to call in some old debts. I may even need to reconnoiter the enemy and gather intel myself. Fine. Whatever. It doesn’t matter.

I have to be ready when Duo finally thinks to ask, when he’s finally ready to consider the daunting task of making reparations, when he’s brave enough—naive enough—to ask for forgiveness.

I have to be ready.

It takes eight days, uncounted hours spent at anonymous computer terminals, visits to strangers during what little free time I have, and every last credit I possess.

March arrives with a wind that rolls and rips at the tent canvas. The trailers rock on their wheels. The big top sways.

As I return from my final errand, I find the sight and sound of the rainless storm fitting.

I squint up at the sky as clouds race toward the setting sun.

“I’m ready,” I tell whatever deity may be listening. “Do your worst.”

It’s time for me to do mine. Life is a game of chess. Strategy and sacrifices.

Duo and I had played chess only once, aboard Peace Million in the calm before the storm. I want him here with me as I do this, but even I know that the most precious piece — the king — is not permitted to make more than a simple move in his own defense.

I’m well aware that Duo can defend himself, but I’m reasonably certain that he won’t. Not against this.

So I will protect him.

I don’t know any other way. But I’m confident. The confidence of a mercenary is no small thing.

I make the first move:

“I am called Trowa Barton.”
I place the call in the middle of the night. I don’t bother with a live feed. For this, a pre-recorded message is more than sufficient. The soldier in me comes out for this task. He does what is necessary. He does one thing at a time. He is careful, methodical, precise.

“I was a rebel soldier during the war.”

Only later, as I watch Duo sleep in our shared bunk do I begin to regret. I’ve set events in motion that will change everything.

“I met a young man who called himself Duo Maxwell.”

I lower myself carefully to the bed but remain awake. It’s strange; I’d begun my quest with a single purpose: help Duo. And now, in order to help him, I must be cold, calculating, merciless. I’d warned him I could be. He’d told me he wasn’t scared of that.

“We trusted each other with our lives but only recently have we become friends.”

I’m going to see Duo through this. When he looks into the faces of these strangers, hoping for absolution and waiting for their judgment, I will be there.

“And when he told me the story of his past, I knew I had to contact you.”

Duo rolls over in his sleep and settles against my shoulder. I turn my face toward his messy braid and inhale. There’s no flowery aroma from the complimentary shampoo at the inn, no astringent scent from the sanitize gel we’d used in outer space. Only the mild scent of my own soap—the soap I’d left behind when I’d gone to look for him. I like the smell of it on him; it’s familiar but not. Like the sight of him in my sweater.

“I know what I’m about to say will be difficult to believe.”

Duo kicks out in his sleep, his brows draw together, a pained sound vibrates in his throat.

“I’m here,” I tell him, massaging his neck and rubbing his shoulders. “It’s all right.”

But it’s not. Duo cannot go on like this, a slave to the past. He must deal, adapt, move forward. He deserves to have his life be his own.

“Duo Maxwell is not his given name. It’s the name of a lost child who grew up on the streets of a colony in L2. It’s the name chosen by a little boy who couldn’t remember his real name, which I believe had once been Jesse Franklin...”

Duo relaxes against me as the nightmare fades. I close my eyes. This is the beginning of the end.

Chapter End Notes

Little does Trowa know, but the manager/ringmaster actually admires him for being strong enough to fight. This comes from the same episode where Trowa regains his memories via the Zero System.
“Morning, Cathy.”

“Good morning, Duo,” she replies with a smile.

I plop myself down in the dented collapsible chair across from her, then reach for the mug I’d taken care to set down first. Dramatic entrances have been ruined by lesser adversaries than a splash of scalding hot coffee.

I guess you could say that I’m playing it safe these days. No boats a-rocking. Let the moss grow on the not-rolling stone. That sort of shit. In a way, it’s nice. That’s what I tell myself, anyway. What it really comes down to, though, is the Devil I know.

I blow softly on the surface of my coffee, looking through my bangs at my table mate. She seems pale or something. Her shoulders are slumped and her makeup can’t hide the dark shadows beneath her eyes.

“You sick, Cath?” I come right out and blurt, wondering if I can shock a little honesty out of her. For the last two weeks, I haven’t butted in. I’ve taken lots of notes, though. And I’m ready to do some shit about it now.


Huh. OK. So whatever the deal is, it’s not medical. That’s a relief, but the diagnosis is gonna be all that much more challenging now.

“You’ve been pretty quiet,” I say, offering up an explanation for my question before I get caught between a rock and a hard place. Women are good at twisting a well-meaning guy’s comments around like that.

Hah. Turns out rubbing elbows with Hilde had taught me something after all.

“Just thinking,” she says.

I showily brace myself against the edge of the table. “Thanks for the warning.”

She rolls her eyes, a helpless smile pulling at her lips.

I go back to giving myself a facial in the coffee steam. When she doesn’t say anything, I glance around the mess tent, nodding to my fellow part-time mechanics slash part-time performers when
they sense my gaze and look up.

Then I let the next bomb shell drop: “So where’s Tro?”

“He’s already started going through his routines.”


“This early, huh?” I reply, not for the sake of examining his schedule, though. It merely serves as a lead-in for my next remark. From behind the rim of my mug, I mutter, “I didn’t even hear him leave.”

“You say that like it’s unusual,” she replies with a small laugh.

Ah, she’s noticed his natural stealth-mode, too, has she? But, it makes me wonder…

I shrug, all Mister Casual. “It is. But, since we got here, he’s gotten really good at sneaking out of the trailer before I wake up.”

“Sounds like he’s avoiding both of us,” Cathy observes.

Hm. Now we’re onto something here. Unfortunately, the barb doesn’t just strike her. Tro and I used to catch a break together pretty much every day, but now I barely see him: usually in the evening when he comes in and almost never in the morning. I wake up to the sound of the door shutting behind him. What the actual hell is up with that?

I might not have the balls to deal with that, but luckily I’ve got Cathy’s misery to distract me.

Jesus. I’m such a prince charming.

Well, then I guess there’s no reason to not get on with being an irritating jerkwad.

I demand, “What’s the deal between you and Tro? I can tell something’s off.”

Cathy wraps an arm around her stomach. Uh-oh. This is not cool. If she’s not sick and the mention of circus shit hadn’t drawn a reaction, but she goes from zero-to-protective this fast…

I’m pretty sure I don’t wanna know, but I gotta ask anyway.

“It’s… it’s not…um. Is it, uh, a romantic problem?” I venture as diplomatically as I can. Hell, it’d been either this question or ask her when the baby is due.

Cathy’s gaze snaps up. “What?” she chokes, eyes wide.

My gaze drops to her belly, which still looks pretty flat under her blouse, and then lifts back to her face. I quirk a brow.

She coughs. Sputters. Snorts. And then she’s laughing so hard that tears of hysterical mirth are streaming down her face. Every head inside the tent turns.

“So that’s a ‘no’ to the tutu idea?” I say for the benefit of the bystanders. Several people roll their eyes. One of the guys I’ve worked on truck engines with volunteers, “I’d pay to see you in a tutu, Maxwell.”

“You’d pay, all right — with your life!” I holler back.
Things settle down. Cathy included. “Oh, Duo,” she breathes between the occasional gasping giggle. “Spoken like someone in love.”


Cradling her jaw in one palm, Cathy assures me in a confiding whisper, “It’s OK. What’s between me and Trowa isn’t romantic. He might love me, but he’s in love with you.”

Oh, shit. Someone else has noticed. So that means I’m not deluding myself. The shit I wouldn’t let him tell me when we’d been in space — the hints of more that I feel resonating in me — it’s all real. I just can’t even begin to deal with that. Which means it’s time to get this conversation back on track: “So what’s the problem, then?”

She cocks her head to the side and looks inquisitive.

“Don’t sit there and tell me the two of you are just peachy, because you’re not.”

Cathy wilts a little in her seat. I inquire gently, “What happened, Cath?”

“Why are you asking, Duo?” she replies, looking wounded.

Her pain catches me off-guard. “I’m sorry.” The words aren’t a manipulation. I genuinely am sorry. “It’s just... Trowa knows something’s wrong and I think it’s bothering him that you won’t tell him. And, since I’ve gotten here, you’ve been really great to me. I can’t just watch both of you go on hurting like this, you know?”

Cathy sighs and crosses her arms against her stomach. Leaning closer, she demands, “You won’t say anything to him, will you?”

She has no idea how many loopholes there are in a question like that, but I promise, “I won’t, but you’d better.”

One corner of her mouth twitches. “Maybe you can help me figure out how to tell him?”

“That you and Quatre Winner are expecting triplets?”

She kicks me under the table. Hah. That’s more like the Cathy I know.

“You’ll find I’m pretty good with sensitive shit,” I brag as pompously as possible.

She snorts. “God help me. I didn’t really just ask for your help, did I?”

“You sure did,” I inform her with an eyebrow waggle. “Too late to back out now.”

She huffs.

I drink more coffee. As if I need it. I’m plenty obnoxious already. OK. Time to shift gears. I let Mister Nice Guy have a turn at the helm: “Yeah. I’ll help you tell him.”

She looks up and I meet her gaze. No jokes. No tricks. The moment of understanding pulls us together. She tells me, “Thanks.”

“No problemo. But maybe you could tell me what it is before you thank me?”

“Oh, I suppose.”
She leans over the table and speaks softly, wary of being overheard.

“I was in the communications trailer looking for some old contracts. We’d begun booking our spring performances and the mayor of Luxembourg City threw a fit when he found out we were planning to be in outer space for the first week of April. Apparently, we have a standing agreement with his city to be there for the fifteenth.” Cathy waves her hand, dismissing the details.

“Anyway, the manager asked me to dig up the paperwork, if we had it. So I was going through these boxes and I found an old photo album. I wasn’t going to look through it. Why bother, right? But the stack I set it on fell over and some of the photos came loose. I was putting it back together when I found a picture of my parents. And me. And my little brother.”

“You have a brother?” I blurt—but quietly—when she pauses for breath.

“I had a brother,” she corrects me. “He and my parents were killed during an air strike when I was just a little girl.”

“I’m sorry, Cathy. I—”

She holds up a hand. I shut up.

“But when I saw those pictures again, details that I’d forgotten came back. I remembered that Dad had this soft, red-brown hair that would fall over his brow when it got too long and these gentle green eyes. Everyone thought my brother had died in the explosion with my parents, but then I remembered seeing burn scars on Trowa’s back and I realized he’s the right age, too—”

“Hold up. You think Trowa might be your little brother?”

“I don’t just think so, I know so. When Trowa and I were practicing this new knife-throwing act, I...” She winces. “I nicked him on purpose. Just on the arm,” Cathy hurries to assure me before my look of disbelief builds up the momentum to become a screaming fit of Shinigami proportions.

She explains, “I used a clean handkerchief to wipe away the blood and I took it to a local clinic to be tested against a lock of hair that I’d believed to be from my mother. Our mother, as it turns out.” With a tremulous smile, she punch-lines, “Trowa and I have the same mother. He is my brother, Triton Bloom.”

I lean back. Almost too far. My grip on the cooling coffee mug somehow keeps me from falling ass over fart handle. “Jesus. How long have you known?”

Looking a little embarrassed, Cathy replies, “I got the call the day before he left to look for you. I... I tried to stop him from going. I’m sorry, Duo. I was just... I was afraid that fate would take him away again and I—”

“I understand, Cathy.” I understand so much more than she realizes. I reach across the table to grip her hand. “It’s OK. He helped me and he made it back here safe.”

“And now I have you to help me keep an eye on him. Right, Duo?”

Oh, man. I hate the thought of killing that hopeful gleam in her eye, but I gotta be real with her. Withdrawing my hand, I concede, “I’m not so sure I’m the best man for the job.”

Cathy blinks. “What? What are you talking about?”

I shrug. “You can’t tie a guy like Trowa down. And I kinda have been. I think I might be wearing
out my welcome.” It’s one explanation for why I’ve barely seen him over the last week.

She gasps. “You’re not thinking of leaving are you?”

Suddenly, all my masks turn to mist. I’ve got nothing to hide behind. “He’s going to get tired of looking after me, eventually. I’ve got a lot of... issues, Cathy. I’m real messed up. I can’t hang around being a pain in the ass forever.”

“But you’re not. Trowa doesn’t think of you like that, he—”

“Has he told you this himself?” I cut in. False hope will kill me. She has no idea how dangerous it is to offer me any hope whatsoever.

She hesitates. “Well, no. But I can see it.”

I shake my head. I can’t listen to this.

She insists, “It’s the way he looks at you. The way he doesn’t hesitate to touch you.” She pauses, suddenly thoughtful. “Does Trowa know you’re planning on leaving?”

I shrug. We had talked about paying Howard a visit, so that’s still tentatively penciled in on my life’s itinerary. I could give deep sea salvage and ship maintenance another shot, I suppose. The nightmares are still gonna be bad, but maybe I won’t scream bloody murder this time around.

“Well,” she tells me in an award-winning older-sister tone, “if he knows you aren’t committed to staying with him that would explain his recent avoidance.”

I grimace. “You make it sound like we’re headed for... well, something we aren’t.” We might have been before I’d lost my shit at the inn. God. I cannot let myself think about that night. Any of it. I blunder on, desperate for a distraction, “I’m not—I can’t—” I sum up: “Trowa deserves better.”

Cathy levels a finger in front of my nose. “Shut up, Duo Maxwell. I’m not going to sit here and listen to that crap. Trowa wants you in his life, and if you hurt him, I’ll break your legs.”

Whoa. Now this right here is the Cathy I’d met near the end of the war. The one that won’t hesitate to wipe the floor with me.

I muse, “And here I thought we were finally getting along.”

She smiles. “But we are. And we will, just as long as you understand where I’m coming from.”

“I have learned to respect my elders,” I tease, hiding behind a sip of lukewarm coffee.

She ignores the jab. “You know, I was never really mad at you, Duo, for finding Trowa after he’d lost his memory.”

Well. Sudden change in topic much? “Really?” I drawl with no small amount of disbelief.

“Yes, really. I was angry with the war, with what Trowa had already sacrificed for it. I just wanted to give him the fresh start he deserved. But... but you were right. You all were.” She smiles sadly. “I couldn’t stop the past from catching up to him. At least with his memories, he was prepared to deal with it.”

“He’s lucky to have a sister like you, Cath. Real, real lucky.”

She attempts a smile, but it’s a bit wobbly. “Thank you, Duo.”
My coffee’s cold, but I’d rather deal with it than the misty look in her eyes. I guzzle until I hit the dregs. Shit. My cover’s blown.

“So what am I going to tell him?” Cathy demands, returning to the issue originale.

“I don’t see anything wrong with the way you told me… but, depending on how close the resemblance is in those pictures, you might want to show him those when you tell him.”

She nods as if I’d actually managed to give some good advice. Maybe I had. I wouldn’t know. A conspiratorial light enters her eyes. “You want to see them?”

“Yeah. Sure.” I nod to my coffee cup as I stand. “Just let me dump this out.”

Thank God for coffee dregs. Jesus. I need a minute to just, y’know, deal. With this.

Trowa has a sister. Cathy is actually his actual sister. I just—

How the actual fuck?

And how did she even make it through to the end of the war when Kurt—

But wait. Trowa had protected Cathy. Instead of blowing the circus to fucking smithereens.

That’s why. That’s how.

God damn it.

My hands are shaking. I fumble, dropping the metal coffee cup. It rattles around in the sink basin. I whistle a tune off-key. Ho-hum. I’d totally meant to do that.

Just like I’d totally meant to blast up the Alliance base.

I don’t belong here. In this hodge-podge circus family. What the fuck had I been thinking following Trowa back to this place?

Oh, yeah. I’d been thinking how nice it’d be to get through eight hours of shut-eye without going ballistic.

So much for that.

At least my bag is still pretty much packed. I’ll be off and Trowa will be able to start focusing on his real priorities.

It was never gonna work out anyway. At least I’m figuring it out now… before I end up reading it on his epitaph.

Now that right there is something to be genuinely thankful for.

Hell, Cathy finding out that her brother is alive after all these years — that’s tune you can dance to.

I’m happy. I’m really happy, I decide.

By the time I’ve washed the cup and set it on the rack, I’m grinning like a maniac. I join Cathy at the tent exit and get the party started: “OK, Cath. Where’s this work of art?”

She smiles. “Right this way!”
I follow her out of the mess hall and along the worn-down-to-bare-dirt path in the sparse grass to the communications trailer. I can’t think of anything to say. I don’t turn toward the big top where the trapeze is set up and Trowa’s doing his thing with the other acrobats. I think about the safety net.

I envy them so much it hurts.

I almost crash into Cathy when she stops at the communications trailer. Thank God she doesn’t notice. She knocks on the door to be sure the room isn’t occupied before ushering me inside. It’s filled to the point of bursting with all kinds of shit. I aim my ass for the chair behind the blank vid screen and hope I won’t be in her way.

Cathy unburies the box containing the photo album.

“Have you thought of putting those photos on a data disk for safe keeping?” I suggest. God knows how easy it is to lose shit in a fire. Well, God knows that and so do I, apparently.

She grins, leaning over the carton with the lid in hand. “What do you think I’ve been doing with myself when I haven’t been able to sleep?”

“Grooming the elephant? Talking to the lions?”

She rolls her eyes. “Even they get tired of me after a few hours.”

“No! Really? I don’t believe it.”

She snorts. “Jerk.”

I grin. I totally am.

Cathy lifts out the heavy tome and offers it to me with both hands. I’m real careful to hold it level and place it safely on the desk.

“This looks like it’s about ready to fall apart.” I’m kind of afraid to touch it.

She reaches past my shoulder and opens the album. “Just don’t breathe hard,” she advises.

“No kidding.”

Cathy continues flipping carefully through the yellowed pages until: “Here.”

I give my attention to the page she’s pointing to and get my first look at Trowa’s family.

“Is this you?” I point to a little girl posing in a pink tutu.

“Yup.”

“You were cute,” I tell her.

Her eyebrows arch. “I was cute?”

Ah. This would be one of those rock-or-hard-place moments. I grin unrepentantly up at her. “Yeah. What happened, Cath?”

“I met you,” she retorts with a huff.

Nice one. I turn back to the pictures. “These your parents?”
“Yeah,” she says, her voice softening.

I examine the people in the photograph carefully. “You weren’t imagining it,” I reassure her. “There is a really strong resemblance between Trowa and your dad.”

Her gaze follows my finger to the face in the picture. “That’s my mom,” Cathy corrects and I snicker. “Can you be serious about anything?” she asks.

“Sorry—” But I’m really not. At all. I need to be an ass or I will lose my shit all over this fucking trailer. “It’s just kind of weird knowing Tro and I don’t have the whole family-less thing in common anymore.”

A hand settles on my shoulder. “I know, Duo. I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to it, either.”

“Well, you’d better,” I order. “Because if you hurt him I’ll break your legs.”

Cathy laughs.


Her expression softens. “Thanks, Duo.”

“You’re welcome, Cathy.”

She nods. “Well, I... thank you for listening, Duo. I feel much better now that I’m not the only one who knows.”

“Yeah.” My voice is gruff. I have to stop and clear it. “I know what that’s like.”

We both get real quiet for a moment, and then Cathy offers to put the album away.

“Actually, do you mind if I look through it for a while?”

“No at all.” She gives my shoulder a pat before maneuvering past the stacks and out the open doorway. “I’ll see you later,” she calls back.

“Later, Cath.”

She more or less skips down the path. I lean around, watching until she’s out of sight. Once I’m sure I’m alone, I let myself really look at the photos of Trowa and his family again.

Trowa’s father walking the tightrope with Cathy.

Cathy and Trowa on the back of a pony, their father's long arms wrapped around them as he stands to the side.

Trowa as a toddler petting a half-grown lion cub while being held safely in his mother’s arms.

On either side of the open volume, my hands curl into fists. My vision blurs.

Howard. I need to call Howard as soon as possible. Find out where the old buzzard is going to make port next. Hike my ass out there. Yeah. There’s a plan.

But I still owe the manager a full day’s work, so it’s time to get on with it. Maybe the mechanics have something for me to work on. Or I could just break one of the trucks in order to fix it. Sounds
fun... not.

I carefully collect the album and gently pack it back into its box. I’ve just settled the lid in place and I’m seriously considering checking my messages for an update from Jamesson — he’d been just hunky dory according to his last e-mail, but if anyone knows how fast your life can go to shit in space, it’s me — when the vid phone beeps, alerting me to an in-coming call.

God damn it. All I fucking need right now is to run around the site yelling for the manager. The perfect way to round out my morning.

I lean back in the old chair and punch the button to activate the viewer. As it warms up, I flip the switch for the audio.

“Hello, hello! You’ve reached the most sensational circus in the Earth Sphere United Nations. What can I do for you?”

There’s a slight hesitation. “Hello. Is Trowa Barton there?”

“Yeah,” I say, checking my watch. He’s still in rehearsal for tonight’s show, I bet. I squint at the vid screen as it finally starts to warm up, revealing a dim ghost of a face. “Can you hold on for a few minutes while I check if he’s able to take a call? Or I can have him call you back if... you... want...”

The screen is now fully illuminated, which means that the ancient camera is definitely transmitting my image to the caller.

As if I could give two shits about that.

I stare, wide-eyed and fucking flummoxed, into a face so familiar I honestly don’t know if I’m awake.

The light brown hair and trimmed mustache, the hazel eyes...

Oh, God. I know this face. I’ve memorized it. I torture myself with recollections of it.

I can’t speak. Or blink. Or think.

Am I breathing?

Equally stunned, the man stares back at me, uncomprehending. Finally, he gathers his voice enough to enunciate, “Jesse?”

Jesus. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. My eyes—there’s something wrong with them—they’re all hot and everything’s gone blurry. Something rocks the trailer. Or is it me that’s shaking?

I suck in a hiccuping breath and choke out a single word, “D-dad?”

Chapter End Notes

According to “Episode Zero,” Cathy lost her parents and little brother in an air rad when she was nine years old. Trowa/Noname was four when he was taken in by the
mercenaries, which means Cathy is anywhere between five and eight years older than him. (In the manga illustrations of the air raid, her brother appears to be about a year old.)

“Episode Zero” never definitively says that Trowa and Cathy are biological siblings, but I like to think that they are. There’s the “found family” theme of the series when all the pilots pull together at the end, and the “not found” family idea of Cathy really being Trowa’s older sister, but no one knows for sure.

The photo album is my invention: I like the idea that Trowa met some of the circus animals before. It’s just barely possible that, thirteen years later, one of the lions might recognize his scent and let him pet her (in the scene from the TV series where Trowa shows up looking for work at the circus and meets the manager for the first time).

And Duo's line about Trona NOT blowing up the circus is meant to be a Manny tongue-in-cheek moment because Trowa DOES nearly wreck the circus and screw everyone six ways to Sunday in the series (when the circus is performing for some OZ/Alliance officers and Trowa decides to use his Gundam for the main event before offing himself)... but Duo doesn't know about any of this. So. Feel free to snorflle there. (^_~)

Also, I want to thank everyone for the amazing feedback and encouragement and flailing that you've been leaving for me (and I haven't replied to). But I want you to know that I love it and adore it and I THANK YOU for it. (Especially loving the reception that merc!Trowa got in the last chapter. That was FUN.) (^_^) HUGS!!
Music rec: "Do I Wanna Know?" by Arctic Monkeys
(oh, God, I ran across this song in another fandom but it is 500 kinds of PERFECT FOR EVERYTHING)

As soon as Cathy enters the tent, I know I won’t be able to continue the rehearsal. One glance at her tells me this much. Her shoulders are stiff and her arms are crossed tightly over her chest. I’m sure even her eyes are narrowed.

I sigh. She’s determined to give me a good talking-to. It’s up to me where that will happen. If I don’t climb down and let her say her piece, she’ll holler it up at me for everyone to hear.

“Sorry, Boris, Alvina. Give me a few minutes?”

“Good luck,” Boris mutters, nodding for Alvina to begin her approach as he grasps the swing.

I descend the trapeze ladder, leaping the last few rungs, and I give Cathy my undivided attention.

“Trowa Barton,” she begins and I wonder what I’ve done to deserve her ire this time. I don’t say anything. I don’t have to. Cathy’s already getting right to the point. “What have you done to Duo?”

I frown. This is unexpected.

“Do you know that he’s thinking about leaving already?”

My breath stops on a thrill of panic. Duo can’t go. Not yet. He has nowhere to go except for Howard’s—

“But really, why wouldn’t he?” she continues. “If you’ve been avoiding him like you’ve been avoiding me, it’s no wonder. He probably thinks you’re tired of him hanging around. That you’re just feeling sorry for him or something.”

“That’s not it, Cathy,” I attempt to interject on my own behalf.

“Oh, well that’s a relief to hear. Too bad you’re telling that to the wrong person!”

I blink at her, stunned by her vehemence.


She storms backstage.

I remain right where I’m standing, rooted to the spot. It’s been a long, long time — during wartime,
in fact — since I’ve seen her this worked up about anything. Are things really as bad as she says? Is Duo packing his things at this very moment?

The thought spurs me into action.

I race outside and head straight for our trailer. If Duo is there preparing to leave, I’d damn well better have a good, solid reason ready for him to stay on with the circus. Or, failing that, an incentive for him to take me with him to Howard’s.

I cut across the lawn, ducking beneath the uniformly stretched laundry lines. The bleached linens wave in the slight breeze. I bat them aside with tacky, resin-dusted hands, not stopping until I’ve jogged up to the door of the trailer where I knock once and wrench it open. “Duo?”

There is no reply. I blink. My eyes adjust to the shadows and I scan the interior. No Duo.

My grip around the door latch tightens until I take note of Duo’s pack. It’s still stowed under the bunk and mostly deflated.

Thank God. I slouch against the door frame. Take a deep breath. Push back the panic. Think through the blind relief.

Right, so Duo hasn’t packed... yet.

Where is he?

With an irritated growl, I head back out into the bright morning and take off again. I check the trucks. All of them are right where they should be and none are currently being given a thorough inspection by Duo. I lean into the mess tent and scan the kitchen and pantry areas, but there is no figure with a long braid tucking rations into his pockets.

Without a word to the few lingering occupants, I hurry on with my search. Duo isn’t comfortable around the animals and I’ve never seen him enter anyone else’s personal trailer.

I’m running out of places to look.

Another possibility is that Duo has just wandered off for a little time to plan out his next step. But before I resign myself to waiting for him back at the trailer, holding Duo’s things hostage, I’ll check one more place...

I stop short when I turn the corner and find the door of the communications trailer standing open. Duo is in the process of leaning over the desk to answer a vid call.

Howard?

I duck out of the immediate line of sight. I wait. I listen. I’ll need a strategy before—

An unfamiliar voice calls my name — “Is Trowa Barton there?” — and for a solid five seconds, I struggle to think of who could possibly be calling for—

The answer hits me like a physical blow.

I lunge for the doorway just as Duo’s reply trails off. Knowing that the circus’ ancient vid screen has finished warming up by now, I brace myself for the worst.

“Jesse?”
I wince at the hopeful desperation in the man’s voice. Shit.

“D-dad?”

The breathless ache behind Duo’s stutter makes me stumble as I clamor through the doorway. With a glance, I realize that the situation is much, much worse than I’d anticipated.

The face on the vid screen.

The tremors wracking Duo’s body.

I reach for Duo, hauling him off of the edge of the chair and against me. I don’t spare a second glance at the screen as I reach around Duo’s hips and disconnect the call. There’s no way I can maneuver Duo, such as he is, across the grounds to our trailer. I yank the door shut behind me, locking us inside, and I tighten my arms around him.

“It’s OK, Duo,” I murmur. “I’m here now. I’m right here...”

Still stiff and shaking, Duo whispers fiercely, “It is not OK! I just... I just saw my... am I awake? I’m awake, aren’t I? Am I losing my mind?”

“No, you’re all right,” I promise. “You’re awake and what you saw was real.”

Duo pulls back, sucks great gulps of air into his lungs. “What I saw—my—he’s alive?” He squeezes his eyes shut, bows his head. Forehead pressing against the top of my sternum, his hair tickling my chin, Duo shakes his head. “No. No. He’s dead. I... Shinigami killed him.”

“Duo,” I beseech, attempting to get his attention.

“And what the fuck was he doing calling you?” Duo fairly shouts finally leaning back far enough to glare at me.

Calmly, I begin, “Duo, I—”

“That’s some sense of timing you’ve got there, pal.” Duo’s eyes narrow further. “You’ve been avoiding me like I’m the fucking plague all week and now you show up? What the hell?”

I look squarely back at Duo. Hands fisted at his sides and breath coming hard, the former Deathsytech pilot is a formidable sight. So much so that I immediately resign myself to having this conversation here and now, whether either of us is ready for it or not.

... DUO ...

“So, when exactly were you planning on telling me about this?” I demand in a low hiss.

“When you were ready—” Trowa starts to say.

“When I was ready?” I have never been so blindly enraged, so lethally determined, so entirely close to killing another person without actually doing it. “How in the hell am I supposed to be more ready for hearing that my father’s really alive?”

“No, wait—”

“You sick asshole. I can’t believe you! How could you let me go on thinking I’d killed him?!”
I shove myself away from him, my belly lurching with loathing. He stares back at me. So calm. So fucking calm. My fury hardens into lead. It holds me down, prevents me from flying, literally flying, into a rage.

I reach around him for the door knob.

My back slams against the door. I'm dizzy from shock and anger and Trowa's resined hands spinning me completely around.

"You want the truth, Duo?" Trowa replies softly in deft contrast to his strength. "Here it is: when I started looking for you, I promised myself I'd do whatever I had to in order to help you. Whatever you needed. It didn't matter what it was because I was going to give it to you. I owed it to you."

I just—I cannot even begin to—!

"Jesus," I spit out. "So the whole thing—all of it—was to ease your conscience?" I cough, sharp and cynical. So much for semper fi. "Well, this just keeps getting better and better."

I move to leave.

"Shut up, Duo," Trowa replies harshly, shoving me back against the door again. "Maybe it was about me. Maybe I needed to do this for me as much as for you, but there is not a day we've spent together that I haven't wished it would last ten years instead of twenty-four hours. I wanted to be there with you. And that's the problem because it's not supposed to be about what I want. It's supposed to be about what you need in order to get on with your life!"

Silence rings through the small, cluttered room. Several heartbeats pound off in my chest. I can't think of a single thing to say. Trowa also calms.

Our breathing slows.

Trowa no longer holds me against the door.

I don't try to leave.

He leans closer, and I let him. Even when he hesitates, just briefly, I don't stop him. His lips caress my cheek and down to the corner of my jaw. My eyes close. My hands lift to his hips. The fabric of his leotard deal is smooth and clingy beneath my fingers. I try to swallow. I can't.

"I wasn't avoiding you."

I don't know if I believe him, but my body sure does. My blood is tingling, warming every inch of my skin. "Then what the hell have you been doing?"

"Running errands. Doing research."

"You checked to see if Kurt Franklin was really dead," I say for him.

"Yes, I checked," Trowa murmurs, pulling back. I open my eyes and look into his. He says, "I checked."

"And he's not. Dead." I'm proud of the flatness of my tone. That's Trowa-quality control right there.

Trowa shakes his head. "Kurt Franklin died in the explosion. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Duo."
I gape at him. “What the hell? I saw him! He just called you—”

“That wasn’t your father.”

I am so fucking confused. “What?”

Trowa settles his hands on my shoulders and explains, “That was your father’s brother, Ernest Franklin.”

I slump back against the door. Swallow once, thinking. “But that’s not possible. He looked just like him. They’d have to be—”

“Twins?” Trowa supplies softly.

“Yeah. Twins.” I consider Trowa for a moment. “How’d you find out? Driver’s license photo?”

“Passport.”

I nod. “So. That’s my uncle.”

“Yes.”

“And my father’s still dead.”

“Yes.”

“And I’m still the one who killed him.”

“Duo...”

“Aren’t I?” I demand, voice rising.

“Yes,” Trowa replies honestly. “I’m sorry.”

I nod.

For a long moment, neither one of us speaks. I absorb, understand, try to accept. Trowa watches me. Then, with a sigh, I reach up to massage my temples. “You never answered my question.”

“Which one?”

I drop my hands and remind him, “When were you going to tell me?”

Trowa draws a deep breath. Lets it out. Slowly.

“No,” I say. “Don’t you dare filter this shit now. Tell me all of it.”

He sighs. Nods. I’d never seen him look like this before: this weird blend of contrition and—what the hell is that—righteousness?

“Heero, after New Edwards.”

I blink, puzzled by his choice of words. What has that got to do with—?

Trowa continues, “He needed absolution.”
I freeze.

“He looked up the names of every close family member. I drove the truck.”

I nod as comprehension begins to seep in. “Are you offering to drive the truck again?”

“No,” he rasps sharply, looking me in the eye. “I looked them up: your father has one brother, Ernest Franklin, who is married to Mara O’Nell. They have three daughters: Jane, 24, Anne, 21, and Tess, 17. They live in Edinburgh, Scotland. I knew you’d ask sooner or later.”

My brows pull together.

He adds, “I can’t give you absolution, Duo.”

“But my dad’s brother, Ernest Franklin, can?” I doubt with a sneer.

“That wasn’t what—that’s not why he was calling.”

Aaand here’s the other shoe. “You didn’t tell him. About the base.”

Trowa shakes his head. “I sent him a message introducing you: Duo Maxwell.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because we were Gundam pilots,” Trowa explains, looking so tired it’s all I can do to keep myself from wrapping my arms around him. “I gave him your name and my name and this number. I told him to look up our war records. And I told him to think very carefully before contacting me.”

“You threatened him.”

“We are a threat.”

OK. Point. “But, he called. Does that mean he—what does that mean?”

“I’m not sure. He might want to meet you.”

I have an uncle and an aunt and three cousins. Oh, my God.

“You don’t have to,” Trowa assures me. “You don’t have to meet with him. Or any of them.”

I look into his eyes, seeking.

Trowa leans closer, his hands are braced against the door on either side of my face, and he whispers, “You don’t have to tell him anything. You don’t have to face him. I won’t contact him again.”

“You promise?”

Trowa nods.

I tilt my head, our mouths just a moment of weakness apart. “Why’d you do it, Tro?”

“Because I...because. You and I.”

The words shouldn’t make sense, but they do. They make a completely final and self-contained kind of sense.

My heart surges up into my throat. Trowa’s gaze lowers to my lips. I remember the feel of his hands
on my bare skin, the taste of his kisses. My entire body flushes with heat.

His lips part.

I lick mine out of pure reflex. Swift. Anticipating.

“May I?” he whispers.

Oh, God. “Yes,” I breathe.

His lips brush against mine and the touch is so fleeting, so brief, so teasing that a frustrated whine spills out before I can bite it back. “That doesn’t count as a kiss.”

“I’m just getting started,” he informs me. “You might want to hold onto something.”

Him. That’s what my hands grasp. I splay my fingers over his waist, pull him closer, and check, “How’s this?”

“Perfect.”

Oh, God. It is. It really, really is. Maybe I’m no expert on it, but the way Trowa’s mouth fits against mine, hot and hungry—

It can’t possibly get any better than this.

But it does. His knees bend, pinning my hips back against the door with his, and our mouths are suddenly at the same height. He nips my lips, licks his way deep into my mouth, pulls back. The tip of his nose brushes mine as he changes the angle, dives back into me and I can’t think beyond the heat and his taste. I suck on his tongue, hard, and I get to hear that so-quiet moan of his.

I open my eyes, drink in the complete abandon in his expression. Trowa, normally so collected and braced for anything, is bare to me. I brush my tongue alongside his and he lets me in. His taped-up fingers curl against the door on either side of my head. His short, powder-caked nails scrape over the texture of the fiberglass.

I close my eyes. I give myself over to the feel of him. He’s heavy and warm. He breathes in and I breathe out. My hands move, up and inward, over his back. His hips tense, but he doesn’t roll them. He still has some control, then, because I can feel him getting hard against the bulge in the front of my own pants.

He withdraws suddenly from our kiss, ducks down to nibble my jaw and—oh, Jesus—I know where this is going. If he makes it to my neck, I’ll come. Right here. I’ll haul his hips against mine, rub us together in a rhythm that has only one destination.


My figures curl into fists against his lower back.

His breath paints my neck and the underside of my chin as he exhales once, twice, a third time.

Reluctantly, I remove my arms from around him. I flatten my palms against the door. His chest against mine is steadying. His arousal beside mine, not so much. I try not to think about it. Try not to feel it. React to it.

Fuck. It’s like trying to ignore a rampaging lion in the room with us.
Trowa must come to the same conclusion because he carefully eases his lower half away. He
doesn’t push himself off of the door, though. His face lifts and he presses his cheek to mine.

That’s how I know I’m shaking.

Shit. It’s happening again. For a couple of gorgeous minutes, I’d let myself forget the fact that I
don’t deserve any of this. I don’t deserve someone like Trowa. I don’t deserve what he feels for me.
I don’t deserve to have him, to feel these things for him, to want him. I don’t deserve to feel alive.

You are Shinigami. You are Death.

How could I have forgotten? How could I even thought I could have this—him—in the first place?
How could I have given myself over to the feel of Trowa’s gentle hands and bare chest against my
flushed skin and allowed his hot tongue access to my mouth, my jaw, my neck until I’d shattered into
crystalline shards of heat and how could I have felt so alive when I know—I know—that there is
nothing in me except the coldness of—

Death.

Death.

Death.

“Duo.”

I draw in a rattling breath. My teeth are chattering.

Hands pull me away from the solid support at my back.

“Put your arms around me.”

Warm arms wrap around me, burning my skin through my clothes. Death is so cold. So cold.

Dry, sticky fingers tangle in the hair at the base of my neck, pulling the strands. A massage. I
recognize the motions. My body allows it.

My mind, however, is somewhere dark. Ghosts and smoke. Rage and helplessness and guilt.

Death. They all die. They always die. Because of me.

I should have died in the attack that had killed Sylvia Franklin. My mother. I’d had a mother. Once
upon a time.

I should have died with Solo, my brother, my friend.

I should have died with Father Maxwell and Sister Helen in the church. Had they known it was all
my fault? Had Sister Helen figured it out—my curse? I think she had. Why else would she have
held on long enough to give me those words: “May you have God’s blessing…”

But there is no blessing. Not for me. What clings to me is a plague. Anyone who touches me is—

Oh, God. Oh, Trowa. I can’t—I can’t run from this. I can’t hide from it. Whenever I lower my
guard, it’s right there. When I sleep. When I give in. I can’t give in. How do I—how do I not give
in?

“Duo, Duo,” his voice says when I gasp in a breath and I realize I’ve been blathering aloud. Every
damn word. He’s heard it all. He’s seen it all. I’d shown him the site of the church, the base, the journal.

“How can you still be here? I don’t understand how you can still be here. After everything I did—I stole that mobile suit so the rebels would leave the church, but I didn’t get there fast enough—after I wanted him to die—after I wanted all of them to just fucking die!—and after I did that and—nothing I did ever made it better—I’ll kill you, too. Death is in me and it looks out through my eyes and it’s seen you, Tro—it’s—it knows what I’m feeling so I try not to feel it—I try so hard—but I—so long as I don’t say it, maybe you’ll be safe—I just want you to be safe, you know that, right? I don’t mean to hurt anybody—not anymore—but it happens anyway—”

“Duo!”

His shout startles me.

“Look at me. Look at me!”

I open my eyes.

“You haven’t hurt me. You haven’t hurt anyone. The war is over. It’s over.”

I stare at him as tears boil over the edge of my eyelids and scald my cheeks.

“You’re done with death, and it’s done with you. Just let it go.”

I fill my lungs with a stuttering breath. My fingers stop carving handholds into Trowa’s shoulders. I’ve probably bruised him. Shit.

“I’m sorry,” I begin.

“I know.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Duo—”

“I’m so, so sorry.”

“What do you need? Tell me what you need.”

And he’ll get it for me. Whatever it is. Oh, God.

I force myself to take one deep breath…and then another…and another. “Confession,” I hear myself say. “I need to make confession.”

“OK. There’s a church in town. I’ll take you there this—”

I shake my head. “Not that kind of confession.”

He tenses. His entire body goes rigid, but he doesn’t look surprised. He looks like a soldier.

I tell him the mission parameters: “Call Ernest Franklin. Arrange a meeting. Tell him everything.”

Trowa doesn’t ask what the mission objective is. I’m so fucking thankful he doesn’t ask because I can’t think of anything more uncertain than the possibility of forgiveness.
I’m shaking again.

Trowa pulls me against him, wraps himself around me. Where the soldier went, I don’t know, but the muscle-locked alertness is gone.

I close my eyes, rest my chin against his shoulder, and try to imitate his hug: strength without tension. Just let it go, like the man’d said.

I think I might be smiling.

Chapter End Notes

I know next to nothing about panic attacks or even if that’s what Duo experiences.
“Can you see them?” I say under my breath, cowering pathetically behind Trowa. There’s no way he’s not silently laughing at me. I totally deserve it. Duo Maxwell, the pilot of Deathscythe who charged into battle time and time again with a vocal-chord-shredding war cry, is too much of a wimp to face a crowd of disembarking passengers at an airport lobby.

I can kiss whatever respect Trowa still has for me goodbye.

“Tro?” I prompt pitifully.

I startle at the feel of fingers brushing my hand. I glance down: he’s reaching back to offer me his steady grip. I grab on. I think I cut off his circulation, but he doesn’t seem bothered.

“Yes,” he finally says. “I can see them.”

“Um… how, uh, how do they look?” Yes, I’m fully aware of the fact that I could risk a glance over Trowa’s shoulder and see for myself.

Pah-theh-tic.

I can forgive Trowa for sounding amused when he reports: “They look nervous.”

Hah. “That makes three of us.”

Trowa’s thumb rubs over my knuckles and it just floors me that, just six hours ago, our positions had been reversed; it had been me stepping up to the circus manager—the ringmaster himself—to explain why Trowa and I might be late getting back following our day off. Trowa had been absolutely shameless about shoving me under the man’s intimidating scowl to charm us out of taking a pay-cut.

Somehow I’d finagled it. So long as we make it back by noon tomorrow and the circus packs up on schedule, we’ll be in the clear.

Trowa had shaken his head in bemusement.

I’d grinned my fool ass off. “They call me the Ringmaster Whisperer,” I’d bragged just to hear Trowa laugh. Which he had. God, do I love that sound.

I wouldn’t even mind hearing it now, seconds away from looking my uncle and aunt in the eye. I shuffle forward, still in Trowa’s shadow but doing my best to square my shoulders. It’s now or never. If I don’t make an effort to project a little self-confidence, then nothing I do or say later will
convince them that I’m not some wussy kid.

“Mister and Missus Franklin?” Trowa says softly.

I suck in a deep breath, my lashes fluttering when I find myself dining on Trowa’s scent. You’d think I’d be used to it by now.

“Yes,” I hear a woman say pleasantly. “Are you Mister Barton?”

Trowa nods and holds out his right hand, the one that I’m not clutching like a lifeline. I study the angle of his shoulders and the motion of his arm as he shakes hands with Ernest and Mara.

“Trowa Barton,” he confirms before tugging on my fingers. I let go. He shifts to the side and that’s my cue, ladies and gentlemen. Anticipating the mechanical difficulties I’m having with my tongue and throat, he adds, “And this is Duo Maxwell.”

I might not have enough spit in my mouth to polish a cent coin, but I can at least offer my hand. I quickly stick it out in front of me, hold my breath, and grin.

Mara stares at me with wide eyes. Ernest — holy hell, he really does look just like Kurt Franklin plus a few gray hairs — is stock-still as if carved from stone.

Nobody moves.

For a solid thirty seconds, passengers bustle and baggage carts squeak past us.

Shit. Shit shit shit. This had been a monumentally bad idea. I shouldn’t have agreed to this meeting. I shouldn’t have asked Trowa to call them up and negotiate neutral territory and—

Trowa’s hand rubs the back of my shoulder, out of sight.

“Uh…” I begin.

Mara gasps tearfully.

The soft noise jolts Ernest from his shock. “Jesse! It really is you!”

Before I can figure out what I’m supposed to say to that, I’m stumbling forward and crashing against the lapels of Ernest’s trench coat. I blink, wide-eyed and startled stupid, locked in a full hug.

Trowa deserves a fruit basket for not laughing his ass off.

I squirm and Ernest leans back to take a second, longer look at me. “For a minute there I thought I was seeing…” Ernest’s voice trails off. He gives me a small, self-deprecating smile. “Don’t take this the wrong way, lad, but you’ve got Sylvia’s look about you.”

“It must be the braid,” I quip, swiftly. Before my jaw clenches against the boiling, seething emotions that I can’t even begin to sort through or let out.

“Oh my, I’d say you’d have had her beat by a good eight inches,” Mara says with a smile.

Ernest ventures, “I wouldn’t have thought you could remember them…”

He takes one more step back. His intent gaze searches my face and his strong hands grip my shoulders. Like he thinks I might just up and vanish in a puff of smoke on him. Heh. Maybe I should look into the logistics of that… minus the casualties and property damage.
My amusement swirls, gathering into a springboard solid enough to launch a charming grin. I’m so tempted to reach for a mask. It would be so easy to do.

And, just like that, I’ll lose any and every chance at gaining their trust.

“I can’t remember anything before the—um—that far back,” I tell him, shying away from the word “bombing” because, really, which one would I be talking about? The first one, of course. Oh, God. I can’t do this. I have to do this. I need distance. A fucking lot of it. I step back, bump into Tro. He doesn’t budge and that’s somehow enough to freeze the temptation to run and hide right in its tracks.

Ernest’s arms fall away.

I stand up straight. “I—um…” Jesus, this is hard, and I’m just getting started.

A touch at the small of my back reminds me that I’m not alone. Trowa is here. And he’s not going anywhere.

I can do this.

“Mister and Missus Franklin,” Trowa softly interjects, “we’ve reserved a meeting room in the airport hotel. Perhaps we could move this discussion there?”

“Oh, goodness, yes,” Mara quickly agrees, clutching her husband’s arm, and off we go.

I’m on autopilot during our short trek to the airport shuttle tram. Trowa and I had already checked in and double checked the meeting room reservation. But our return trip is little more than a blur to me.

Trowa pauses at the front desk to retrieve the key card for the meeting room. The porter shows us the way. Crossing the threshold, I pace the length of the room through neutral earth tones with a touch of floral color meant to be soothing. Yeah, that’s a fail.

Reaching the opposite wall, I spin like an agitated tiger in a too-small cage, turning in time to see Trowa tip the young lady and shut the door. Damn. I should have remembered to do that. The tip, I mean. I really am just a breath away from losing my shit.

I pace along the far wall, counting off the length of it as I eye up the table and chairs. I don’t think I can sit down.

Ernest and Mara look just as uncertain.

I dig deep for the strength I need to see this through. These people… they seem like good people. Hell, Ernest had damn well hugged me. I just—that kind of acceptance—it’s been so long since—

I stop. I can’t let my mind venture there. I have to deliver my speech, just like I’d practiced.

Drawing a deep breath, I begin, “Before you decide to welcome me into your family, there’s something I need to tell you. Something you need to know. I—”

Trowa holds up a hand.

I frown. “What?”

“First things first,” he reminds us all, gesturing toward the table.

Oh, right. OK.
Mara moves toward a chair. Ernest holds it out for her. I grab the nearest one and drag it out with a little too much force. The rear legs stutter on the carpet. Trowa takes a seat in silence, then removes an envelope from the inner pocket of his jacket.

My frown returns as Trowa unfolds a sheaf of papers. He halves them and passes one set to Ernest and Mara. Then he produces a pen. "As we discussed. Take your time with the agreement. Call your attorney if you’d like. We have all day."

What the hell? I look from Trowa to my uncle and aunt, then I pick up the second copy that Trowa had kept for himself. It takes me a moment to figure out what it is I’m reading.

A guarantee of confidentiality.

What.

I lurch out of my chair. "Trowa, a word?"

He doesn’t appear the slightest bit startled. He just nods and stands.

Once again, he closes the door behind us. I head for the elevator bank. I don’t say a word, not one word, as we wait for a lift. The doors open on a sedate ping! I stare at the floor lights, watching them blink in slow succession. We’re delivered to our floor. I fish the key card out of my pants pocket. Scan. Shoulder open the door. Stop in the middle of the room and wait for Trowa to throw the deadbolt behind us.

I turn and hold out the document in a mute demand for an explanation.

He looks from the papers to me and says, "I told you I’m not driving the truck. I’m not sitting back and watching you hand over a loaded gun to a pair of strangers."

I lick my lips. Try to decide what I ought to say next. "Did you write this?"

"No. I had an attorney draw it up. It’s legal."

"Uh-huh. And if Ernest or Mara repeat what I tell them, we’re gonna do what about it? Call up our good friend Quatre and ask to borrow his legal team?"

Trowa blinks. Huh. He hadn’t thought of that. He looks down at the papers trembling in my grasp. "This is for the sake of clarification. Ernest knows I used to be a mercenary."

My jaw drops. "You would go after him?"

"I’ll go after anyone who tries to hurt you."

My God. That ought to scare the bejesus outta me except that I’d do the same for him. For Cathy. For Heero or Quatre or Wufei. For Howard. For Hilde. But absolutely and especially for Trowa.

The kid who’d survived the streets of a gone-to-shit colony had learned a long time ago that there is no such thing as half-measures when it comes to taking care of family.

Still.

"This—" I rustle the document. "This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. They can’t—I can’t hold a gun to their head and expect to—" I shake my head. "I can’t do this with a safety net."

Trowa crosses the room. He doesn’t try to touch me. His hands are in his pockets. He looks me in the eye and says, "Anger and grief bring out the worst in people. This contract gives them time to
calm down and think things through.”

It hits me then that— “You expect them to go to the authorities.”

“It’s a possibility.”

“It’s their right.” And a risk I don’t particularly relish taking, but now that it’s staring me in the face, I’m pretty sure that’s how it has to happen.

Trowa nods. “In six months, if they still wish to press charges against you, and if you still feel that way, you can release them from the agreement.”

My brows arch. “You’re tying my hands for six months?”

“If you sign it.”

“And why in the hell would I do that?”

“Because you could spend the rest of your life in prison,” he continues, fear and rage flickering-seeping-crashing through his cool façade.

Oh.

That is true. I’d been careful to keep my face angled away from the base’s video cameras, but I’d spoken to Kurt Franklin. Somewhere, there could be a backup recording of my voice. Whatever evidence that had been gathered from the bombing probably still exists in a military archive, waiting for a break in the case to make it worth their while to take it to a lab. My DNA and voice profile and my fingerprint scans are out there somewhere, too, from my time in OZ custody. The only reason no one’s made a connection is because it would be a waste of time and resources to cross-reference and scan for matches without a suspect list. Which I’m on the verge of providing to Ernest and Mara Franklin.

Plus, eye witnesses. I’m pretty sure there hadn’t been any, but I know my home colony. Plenty of people will suddenly find themselves remembering my presence there if it means a “reimbursement” — a lousy one hundred creds — for their time in court.

There are plenty of reasons for me to sign this paper, to ask my uncle and aunt sign it. Trowa draws a deep breath and gives me one more:

“Because the last thing you want is for me to get myself locked up with you.”

“You wouldn’t—!”

“My short list has a lot of names on it, Duo. I’ll check off however many I have to to make it happen.” He nods to the now-wrinkled papers in my cramping grip. “That’s not the safety net.” He reaches back into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulls out two passports. “These are.”

He offers them to me and I open the covers. Photos of us, but altered, stare back. My eye color is slightly off. I have short, wavy hair. I’ve lost weight. But it is definitely me, just slightly off enough to fool a facial marker scan comparing known images of Duo Maxwell and this photo.

Trowa’s had been adjusted, too: added weight, a shaggy haircut that shows all of his face, hazel eyes. We have fake names — maybe randomly selected from a phone directory or newspaper — different birth dates, the whole works.
I have a pretty good idea of how much all this — the confidentiality agreement and the passports — would have cost. It kinda explains why Trowa hadn’t tried to stop me from paying his way here today. Jesus. He’d tapped himself out with all this. A merc with no money. At all.

He implores, “I’m hoping you won’t make me put up with prison food to prove my undying love.”

I... I have to sit down. The nearest surface at an accommodating height is the bed. Which is cool. Totally cool.

I sit. I blink. I take this—all of this—in.

Trowa kneels down in front of me. “Ernest and Mara might forgive you. That’s what I’m hoping for, too.”

“But they might not,” I acknowledge, suddenly terrified of what that could mean. Not for my sake — a lifetime of night terrors is no less than what I deserve — but for Trowa’s. This violence-prone, antisocial, paranoid, not-so-former mercenary loves me. This soft-spoken, witty, gentle, careful man is in love with me. What happens to me affects him. Hadn’t I just figured that out a few days ago in the communications trailer? I need to make peace with what I’ve done or I’m going to have a panic attack every time I let him kiss me.

God damn it. I want those kisses. I want him. I want my life. The past will always be there, but I want to have a future, too.

My throat aches, but I force myself to swallow. “A conk on the noggin woulda been cheaper,” I tell him.

His hands curl over my knees. “Amnesia’s not what it’s cracked up to be.”

For a moment, I don’t get it. And then I do. Trowa Barton has just punned me.

I snort. Lean forward. Tilt my head against his. “That sucked, buddy.”

“You just wish you’d thought of it first.”

“I admit to nothing.”

He draws in a shaky breath. “Nothing?”

I know what I haven’t told him. I hear the fear in his voice that he’s read me wrong, that he’s shown his hand too soon. But he hasn’t. He really hasn’t. But because I’m an obnoxious shit, I have to get him back for that pun. “Amnesia,” I remind him in a toneless sing-song, through a playful grin, “I hear there’s nothing to it.”

He huffs out an exasperated chuckle. “Duo…”

I toss the legal papers onto the bedspread and cup his face in my hands. “I’m not gonna make you suffer through prison food for me.”

I kiss him softly. His hands lift to my shoulders and his mouth clings to mine. When we pull back, I look into his gaze. No one has ever done so much for me. No one.

Sliding off the bed, I push myself to my feet and hunt up a complimentary pen. I sit down at the desk in the room and read the document from beginning to end. As I touch the tip of the pen to the space reserved for my signature, I turn and meet his gaze. His eyes are wet. Tears glisten on his
lashes. There are twin tracks leading to the curve of his jaw, one on each cheek.

I check. “You know why I’m doing this? Or do I need to spell it out?”

I wait to see if he gets the joke.

His lips curve, one side kicking up a little higher than the other in wry appreciation for my off-key humor. “Spell it out,” he says.

With a flourish, I do: I sign.

One down. Two to go.

I get up and reach for his hand. He takes it, pulls me close, and buries his face against my neck. Hugs me tightly.

“You’d better not start licking there, pal."

He inhales shakily. “Not yet,” he promises. “But it’s on the agenda.”

Mine, too. Oh, God, please. One day very soon, mine, too. “First things first,” I remind him.

He steps back and rubs a hand over his face. He still looks like he’s been crying, but I don’t think he cares. He reaches for my hand. I interlace our fingers and we head back downstairs.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for sticking with me! I really hope you like the additions to the story. (^_^)
Cleansing

Chapter Notes

Music rec: “You Found Me” by The Fray

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

... TROWA ...

I lean back in my seat, arms crossed over my chest as I listen to Duo’s soft but firm voice as he relates his story.

All signature lines had been filled in.

An electronic device jammer sits in the center of the table. Duo hadn’t even rolled his eyes when I’d produced it, placed it, and turned it on. Duo hadn’t tried to stop me from doing what I’d needed to. Duo has never tried to stop me from doing whatever I need to do.

There is no greater gift.

Duo lets me be who I am, whoever that is from one moment to the next.

Here and now, I’m focused on protecting him as best I can so that he can offer up his confession, his heart in his hands and his psyche on the edge of the abyss.

Duo leaves nothing out. He describes how he’d survived on the streets: thieving and scrapping. He tells them about the plague that had taken Solo, his brother-in-all-but-blood, from him. He describes the rag-tag band of survivors that he’d led in his dead friend’s memory.

And then everything changes. He’s taken in and cared for by the priest and nun at Maxwell Church. They had been the only two adults he could remember meeting who hadn’t tried to hurt him or take advantage of him. I imagine that blossoming life, that tiny spark of hope that maybe there’s more to the world than gritty survival.

Because I already know what happens next, I have the chance to brace myself. Ernest and Mara are not so fortunate. Duo speaks of the rebels who’d forced their way into the church, unloading their wounded and demanding supplies. Brashly, an eight-year-old Duo had promised to steal them a mobile suit, just to get rid of them. It’s a negotiation like any other. He’s familiar with the way this world works.

He doesn’t skip the details of how he’d charged onto the base and figured out how to turn on and operate a mobile suit carrier truck — “It wasn’t all that different from the colony maintenance consoles. Whenever we could, we’d break in and turn the heat up in our sector. The colony administrators liked to save money by letting the nights get close to zero. Maybe they were hoping to kill off some vermin, too.”

His shrug is off-handed, but his entire being vibrates with pain and rage.
As does mine. Those colony officials who’d approved a policy like that, who’d perpetuated the idea that homeless children like Duo were nothing but garbage to be cleaned off of the street, are at the top of the short list I’d mentioned to Duo.

And then Duo tells the Franklins the conclusion of that horrible day: the Alliance attack that had destroyed everything Duo had dared to hold dear.

“When the woman who showed you how to wash your hair for yourself for the first time—when she dies right in front of you—” He pauses, blinks back tears, but doesn’t cry.

“I swore to avenge their deaths,” Duo grates out, his tone still soft. His hands are clasped tightly on the table but he doesn’t look at them.

He addresses the brother of the man he’d killed, “It became my life’s pursuit to turn myself into a killer.”

The meeting room is so silent my eardrums ache.

When Duo next speaks, his voice gains an edge of fury. In order for him to get it all out, he has to get angry. I uncross my arms, place my hands on my thighs, ready to offer my hand to him if he needs it.

“As much as I hated the rebel groups for continuing the fighting, I hated the Alliance more.”

“Jesse?” Mara whispers, her tone wary and her eyes teary. She doesn’t want to hear where this going. I don’t blame her.

Duo glances at her before forcing himself to forge onward. “They taught me everything I needed to know in order to have my revenge. And so, on the fourth anniversary of the attack, I took it.”

In Ernest’s hands, the diary Duo had offered him creaks in his tightening grip. Duo had already told them about the salvage contract and his discovery. It has taken this long to build toward the truth Duo had promised them.

Ernest presses, “What… Jesse—Duo, what are you trying to tell us?”

They are perhaps the most difficult words Duo has ever had to say, but he does so unflinchingly. “I’m telling you that I am responsible for Kurt’s death.”

Mara is speechless.

Ernest is not. “How can you be responsible? You were a child! What rebel group would give you the training and resources to do this?”

I can sense Duo’s increasing frustration. He wants this done and over with, but until Ernest accepts what Duo is telling him, that isn’t possible.

Oh, Duo.

What he doesn’t know is that this is only the beginning. There will be no absolution today. There may not be any judgment, either.

If he’d gone to a priest, perhaps this would already be over and done with, but this is more of a trial than a confession. Things are not so simple.

I shift my hand beneath the table over to Duo’s knee and begin to rub my thumb back and forth over
Duo collects his thoughts, striving for a way to explain a world that is as alien to the Franklins as their suburban life is to us: “The rebels in L2 only cared about one thing: bringing down the Alliance. I was willing and I came without strings attached. The fact that I was a child only meant that I could fit through smaller spaces.”

Duo shakes his head. “Don’t you get it? They fed, clothed, and trained me. I spied and ran messages for them. I stole weapons and sabotaged off-base Alliance facilities and equipment. And then, when I couldn’t stand the sight of that base on my colony any longer, I took the explosives that I’d stolen and planted them!”

Stubbornly, Ernest shakes his head. “I don’t believe it.”

Duo runs his hands through his bangs, curls his fingers into his hair. “Just ask yourself: why would I make something like this up?”

The man visibly grasps for any reason to dispute what his nephew is telling him. “They caught you,” he suddenly remembers from reading the entry in his brother’s diary. “You were in a detention cell. You couldn’t have—”

Duo laughs harshly. “I wasn’t in the cell when the bombs went off was I? After all, here I am and everyone else who was on that base is dead.”

“How?” Mara breathes, trying to give her husband a moment to calm himself.

Dark humor vanishing, Duo tells her almost apologetically, “I have a knack for getting out of confined spaces.”

Ernest sets the diary down in front of him and rubs his hands over his eyes, suddenly exhausted. “So how did it happen, Jesse? Just tell me plainly.”

Duo nods. “I set the explosives myself at night. Hid during the day and waited. It took about ninety hours from start to finish. They caught me on my way out. Threw me in the brig.” Duo pauses here and I’m sure I’m not the only one who is recalling Kurt’s narrative in the diary: the brief encounter with their preteen prisoner. Duo concludes, “I shorted out the control panel on my cell and snuck out. When I was out of range, I triggered the detonator.”

Those words, spoken so precisely, so coldly, draw a soft sob from Ernest. He doesn’t look up as his shoulders begin to shake. Mara, with tears in her eyes, moves closer to him and puts an arm around his shoulders.

“Is there any possible way you could be mistaken?” she begs, tears brimming over her lashes.

“No, ma’am,” Duo replies softly. “You have my word; it’s the truth. I’m sorry. I’ll never not be sorry.”

I doubt he’ll ever not be angry about it, either, because—

“Nothing will ever undo his death,” Duo admits to her and himself.

She nods as tears roll down her face. She turns to rest her forehead against her husband’s and I know it’s time for us to leave.
I squeeze Duo’s knee before removing my hand. I collect the signal jammer. Turn it off. Slide it back into my jacket pocket. “The meeting room is reserved until nineteen hundred hours. We’ll be staying in the hotel until our flight at five hundred thirty-five tomorrow morning. You know how to reach us if you decide to contact us.”

I stand.

Duo hesitates. “I understand if you don’t want to hear from me again. You won’t.”

He pushes himself up from his seat. When I would have simply turned and left, Duo adds in an unsteady voice, “Thank you for seeing me.”

I wait for him to start moving toward the door so that I can keep myself between him and the grieving couple. Duo notices. Of course he does. He looks up and meets my gaze.

He’s exhausted, soul-battered, and heart-sick.

And he’s just realized what I hadn’t had the courage to tell him: the nightmares will come again. Stronger. Harder. Even more merciless.

Duo has just added two more voices of condemnation to his crime.

I don’t know if I’ll be able to speak over them, if Duo will let me, but I’ll try.

... TROWA ...

A real bed and a hot shower.

They don’t inspire the same anticipation that they had in outer space weeks ago. I turn my attention from the open bathroom door and the pair of hotel beds and regard the silent figure standing at the window.

He can run and he can hide in the wide world out there, but I think he knows he won’t find solace. He’s tried that. And he’s tried opening his pain to me. And he’s tried confessing all. His strength seems endless sometimes.

Duo hasn’t said a word since bidding Ernest and Mara goodbye. I can almost smell the tension in him. Duo needs to let go. At least for now. For the coming night, he absolutely cannot lie down with so much anxiety knotting his body and mind. And I can’t leave him to his self-punishing silence.

Coming up behind him, I wrap my arms around his taut body. My hands cover his and I press my cheek against his ear. For a long moment, Duo doesn’t move. As if he’s merely tolerating the embrace. But then his hands shift and I interlace our fingers.

“That was... hard,” Duo contributes very quietly.

I nod. I’m in awe of him and frankly relieved that he’d acquiesced to signing the contract. I could not have forced him to; I’m well aware of that. But he had signed it. Because I’d asked. Because he loves me. Out of all this pain, this one miracle has happened. I’ve never had a reason to believe in miracles before.

My arms tighten around him, but I know the action doesn’t convey even half of what
I’m feeling. Not that I could have adequately described it with words, so it’s just as well that I try to tell him this way.

“Saying the words to them, that was… oh, God, but this…” Duo confides, “this waiting is even worse.”

And there’s no way of knowing how much time the Franklins will need to come to terms with the details of their loss. There’s no way of knowing if Duo will ever hear from them again.

Absolution. The one thing Duo needs is as distant as ever. A mirage on the horizon. The mythical pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

What can I do? Distract him with kisses and heat? Hold him close when the darkness returns for its next pound of flesh? No. Duo needs something different. Something that lets him feel the pain, not belittle it.

I consider the various religious practices I’ve heard of — bits and pieces of rites and ceremonies — and, suddenly, I have an idea.

Slowly but firmly, I turn Duo in my arms. He lets me. My lips brush across Duo’s eyelids and down the curve of his cheek before settling against his mouth. This kiss is undemanding, soft. My hands frame his face and I brush and nip his lips. Slide our closed mouths together, warming him in a way that does not allow for lust.

I pull back, collect his hands — the hands that have done so many terrible things — and kiss his knuckles. Against his fingertips, I tell him, “I accept you and all you’ve done. I accept you, Duo Maxwell.”

He hiccups. I know it hurts. It’s supposed to.

I reach for his jacket and push it from his shoulders. It falls with a flutter of sound. Mine echoes it. Shirts. Trousers. Underwear and socks. If I’d ever needed proof of his trust in me, here it is.

I look him over as I retake his hands. “For what it’s worth” — and I cannot think of a single other person in the universe who would invest themselves so totally in the opinion of a man who’d spent his childhood destroying the lives of others — “I accept all of you.”

Tears. Mine and his. I recall my tears floating in zero G after I’d passed Commander Une’s test and done my best to obliterate Deathscythe with the weapons at my disposal. Had Duo seen the live broadcast? Had he cried then, too?

I lead him toward the bathroom. Turn on the shower. Test the water. Pull him past the curtain with me.

He doesn’t stop me from reaching for the tie at the end of his braid. His hands are steady on my shoulders. He watches me.

I remember what he’d said about Sister Helen, how she’d taught him to wash his hair, and I hope I’m not making a mistake. Though, to be fair, I’d warned Duo that I probably would.

I wash him. His hair. His scalp. His skin. His scars. Wash the past from his being.

Isn’t that part of the ritual of baptizing? The running water. The support of strong arms as the supplicant is submerged, cleansed of sin, and made new again. Maybe I’m doing it wrong.
But then Duo’s hands move from my shoulders. He turns us so that I’m the one under the spray. He

I think I can feel something — a clinging film, a weight, a restraint — shed from my body.

Our gazes meet in the steam. Is this how it had felt for him, too?

When he presses our bodies together, I’m ready to meet his kiss. His lips fit against mine. Our
mouths open. Tongues brush under the gushing water.

There is no arousal. Only warmth, comfort, safety.

We kiss until our ration of hot water begins to run out. We dry each other off. I wrap up his hair.
On one of the too-stiff hotel beds, I dry it for him. The dryer’s lowest setting creates a soothing
hum.

The tresses gradually go from chocolate to gold-tinted bronze in the light of the setting sun through
the sheer curtain across the window.

I separate the strands into three locks of equal thickness and weight. I still remember what he’d
shown me back in L2: how to braid it. I make it to his shoulders — my hands have remembered the
rhythm of it by now — before deciding that this is wrong. I pluck out the weave up to the base of
his skull, then I dig my fingers down against his scalp, loosening the strands until they fall around his
shoulders.

“I’ll braid it for you later,” I whisper. “Just… just be, now. Just be.”

“I haven’t left it down since I was a kitlet.”

I’m not surprised, but I feel no sense of victory this time. No pride. I swallow thickly and answer
his soft admission with a plea, “Let’s just be children. Tonight.”

For a long moment, he doesn’t move. Then he reaches for the edge of the comforter. We burrow
into the nest he makes for the two of us. Both of us are still bare. I do my best to keep his hair out of
the way, but it slips-slides-spills over my fingers. I give up on controlling it. Duo snuggles against
me, face-to-face, chest-to-chest, and gives up on control itself.

In our dark cocoon, he cries silent tears. I use the edge of the sheet to soak them up off of his skin. I
press a kiss to the center of his forehead. The tears fall faster. He sniffles. It’s fine; I’m ready for
that, too.

I drift off some time before he does.

He wakes me with a kiss. It’s still dark, but it’s morning. His hair is a tangled mess and, even using
both Duo’s comb and mine, it takes us too long to brush it clear of snarls, but it’s worth it. It’s all
worth it because, as we rush to check out and catch our predawn flight, he says two words: “No
nightmares.”

I gape at his soft and genuine and victorious smile.

“Thank you, Tro.”

I shake my head. He still doesn’t understand. His victories are also mine. Happiness and peace,
when he gains these things, so do I. It’s me who ought to be thanking him.
Thank you so much for reading and kudo-ing and commenting on what stirs you. Your love for this story is what keeps me updating, not gonna lie. (^_^) HUGS!
First Gear

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: sexytimes

... DUO ...

Something has changed. It’s hard to describe, but I feel it. Deep down.

I don’t know if it had been Trowa’s unparalleled wingman performance, my confession to the Franklins, the act of parting with Kurt’s journal, or the evening in the hotel room: washing each other and then regressing to the illusion of childhood together. I have no idea what to blame, but maybe it doesn’t matter.

I can finally talk about the nightmares.

Not all at once, of course. Jesus. I know how irrational and stupid they sound in the light of day, but the details start leaking out of me in dribs and drabs. Only when Trowa and I are alone. Only before the nightmares hit; never after. I think we’ve kinda made a game of it: one-for-one. He always waits for me to go first.

That fact alone just makes me appreciate the glimpses into his heart that he’s given me. One of these days, I’m gonna be able to be as forthright.

I’m still working up to it.

Maybe over a romantic dinner of funnel cake and caramel apples. That’s about all I can afford right now, but at least we hadn’t been docked half a day’s pay upon our return; between Trowa and Cathy, they’d made sure I was a help rather than a hindrance in packing up the show.

March is a hard month for the circus as most of Europe practices Lent. I have vague recollections of Father Maxwell and Sister Helen observing the ritual as best they could. It had seemed plain dumb to me that you’d go out of your way to avoid perfectly edible food just because of some shit or other that had happened a long ass time ago.

So, onward. This is Day Two of a long trek east to what the manager had declared is the most fantastically godless city on the planet.

“Is it really godless?” I ask Trowa. It’s my turn to drive the truck and all I have to do is follow the covered back of the vehicle in front of us and the bouncing trailer hitched to it. Boooooring. “You were there last year, right?”

He nods. “I’ve been there before.”

I know that tone, that careful phrasing. “War or merc-time?”

“Both.”
He doesn’t offer and I don’t ask. I drive. Silence settles in the cab.

The tires plunge into a pothole that causes us both to bounce on the bench seat. “Whoo-hoo! That was exciting, yeah? Let’s mark that on the calendar.”

Trowa snorts softly. “I give it a solid 5.5.”

“You’re a harsh judge, man. On the scale of potholes, that was totally a seven.”

“Spoken like a colony boy.”

“Yeah? You like any colony boys?”

Trowa lifts a hand and makes a silent production of counting off on one finger, then pausing for a very long time, wincing as he struggles to recall any others. “Just one. So far,” he finally determines.

“So what d’you like about him?” I ferret with a playful grin. “He looks good in a seat belt?”

“That I can’t wait to unbuckle for him.”

“Hah! I’ll bet. And he’s got nice, strong hands?”

“I’ve never envied a steering wheel and clutch before, so I’d have to say, ‘yes, he does.’”

I chuckle darkly. “You think he’s really imagining the clutch as a clutch when he shifts gears?”

“Probably not. I caught him groping a turnip once, so—”

I cough out a laugh. “Are you ever gonna give that a rest? I’d never seen one before, OK?”

There’s a beat of silence before Trowa returns, “Never seen one… what?”

I pick up the gauntlet. “A big, hard, smooth, fully exposed, impressively-proportioned, dew-kissed, delicious—”

“Just stop right there. I beg you.”


Trowa’s head thumps against the back window of the truck cab. “Which one?”

I hear a telltale soft inflection in his voice: he’s only half joking.

I pause. “Are we talking about shifting gears?”

When he doesn’t answer right away, I quirk a brow in his direction. I glance over. He looks up from where he’d been staring at my crotch. “Not necessarily,” he retreats. “The one we’re in now is fine.”

The one where we both wake up hard in the morning and pretend like we have better things to do than take twenty minutes to get each other off. The one where we lie awake for a solid hour in each other’s arms every night, imagining all the ways we could give each other a shot at very pleasant dreams.

I know he’s thinking about the damn panic attacks.
So am I.

But I might be willing to risk it now. If he is.

I think about it for the rest of the day. I’m pretty sure he does, too. When we stop for the night and withdraw to our trailer, I hesitate to join him on the bunk. He’s already lying down in “his” spot next to the wall, waiting for me, so I know I’ve got his complete attention when I perch on the edge of the thin mattress.

“My nightmares,” I begin and he leans up on an elbow. That’s how he is: meeting shit head-on when I decide I’m ready to face it.

I’ve told him a lot about the different variations of my night terrors. There’s the one where I kill Sister Helen with my bare hands. And the one where Father Maxwell is crushed beneath the mobile suit I’ve stolen. But I haven’t told him this one yet: “I blow up the base and I’m surrounded by flames and debris and I see Kurt’s body. You’re holding him in your arms, and you tell me I’m Shinigami. And then you walk away.”

He’d sat up when I’d mentioned his role in my nightmare. He doesn’t say a word. But it’s cool. He can probably tell I’m not finished yet.


His hands reach for mine.

I soldier on, “And I appreciate that you’ve been waiting for me to get my shit together, but I can’t go through life just coasting in neutral.”

His fingers tighten.

I propose, “So, whaddaya say we give first gear another shot?”

He leans in and kisses me on the lips. Briefly.

Damn it. I hate it when he pulls this crap. Doesn’t he know it’s rude to tease?

He reaches for my arms and — oh, Jesus, I know this look. This is the Shit-and-What Will Be Said Look. His long, warn fingers curl over my bare biceps and he says, “I’m going to tell you something.”

I nod. Not nervous. At all. “Yeah. OK.”

“You don’t know that you deserve any such thing.”

I frown.

“I don’t know much about religion. And I know nothing about God. But you and I are human. Just human. What we deserve or don’t deserve, that’s not for us to decide for ourselves. Or know.”

He really believes this.

He watches our hands as he rubs his thumbs over mine, and then he looks into my eyes. “We… humans,” he clarifies and I feel a spike of irreverent humor. For guys like Tro and I, it’s so easy to forget that we’re a member of a species. Yeah, we look human, we look just like other people, but it sure as hell doesn’t feel like we’re one of them. Not even on our best days.
Trowa speaks slowly and with precision that I hardly ever bother with, “We try to be more than we are. That’s not a bad thing, but we forget that, in a lot of ways, we’re just like other animals. We want. We need. We fear. We survive. There’s no logic to it. It’s just nature.”

I give him a sad, crooked smile. “A colony boy like me wouldn’t know.”

“So pay attention,” he commands on a gentle smile.

“Pay? I’m a little short on cash.”

“I’ll let you have this one for a kiss.”

I lean forward and kiss him. Taste him. For a moment, I think we might be onto something, but then he leans away and tells me, “There’ll be good nights and bad ones—”

“Way to hold onto the mystery, there, Tro.”

My brows climb up to my hairline as Trowa, literally, pinches my lips shut with his fingers.

“—but not because you or I are especially to blame. If there was such a thing as divine justice, if everyone got exactly what they deserved in life, we wouldn’t have police or court rooms. We wouldn’t even have words to describe them because there never would have been a need for them in the first place.”

Oh.

I just… Wow.

His logic, quiet and certain — I feel it. Right in the center of my chest. The power in those words. They resonate. Make complete and total sense to the part of me that knows how to fight dirty, the part of me that had to learn how to fight dirty in order to see the dawn of the next day cycle.

His hand moves to cradle my jaw. “The things that we’ve done, they hurt us. Because we care.”

He doesn’t have to tell me why that’s important. I’m not a total idiot. I know why. He wouldn’t be capable of love if he didn’t care about the death and tragedy in his past. The same goes for me.

“We care,” he repeats, “but that doesn’t mean we have to suffer. It doesn’t even mean we’re supposed to suffer. It means we’re human. That’s all. We’re allowed to be flawed.”

“Question: is leaving the toilet seat up a flaw?”

Both his hands encircle my neck in a mock choke-hold.

I fight back with a charming grin.

His burgeoning irritation visibly melts.

“I can live with it. I can live with all of it, Duo,” he tells me. And then, with a soft look that makes my pulse vibrate, he murmurs, “I’m happy to.”

I—holy shit. I make him happy? No one has ever said anything like that to me. Sister Helen had told me she loved me, but happy—?

I’m shaken, so I fumble for a joke. “You totally dropped the ball on the truck metaphors.”
He grimaces theatrically. “Is it too late to steer us back on track?”

“Not so long as you go easy on the throttle.” His hands are still spanning my throat, after all.

His thumbs shift, brushing back and forth softly on either side of my Adam’s apple. This time, when I move in for a kiss, he doesn’t interrupt. His lips part and he just about sucks my tongue into his mouth and the rush of heat completely fries my brain. My body wants his against mine. Now. I move in without thinking, pinning him back against the wall of the trailer. I’m crouching, his long legs draped over my folded knees, bracketing my hips.

His hands — one curls around the back of my neck and the other tightens on my hip and he pulls me closer into his heat. I’m aching, burning, starving for him. The kiss deepens as our hunger rises. I press against him, greedy. Feral. God, how I’ve missed him. Oh, how I’ve hated putting the brakes on time and time again.

I scratch my fingernails through his hair, glance over the shell of his ear, grope the line of his neck until I hit the collar of his T-shirt, but I don’t tug at it. He’s with me, kissing me back like he’ll never stop, like every desperate breath and groan and wet, sucking caress of our mouths is the sum total of the whole fucking universe. He closes his eyes and gives me this and if he wants to keep his clothes on, I am totally cool with that.

However, I remember the feel of his bare hands moving over my back and I need that again. Right now. I lean away just far enough to yank my shirt over my head, toss it aside. Trowa’s legs wrap around my waist and he pulls himself away from the wall — Jesus, it’s easy to see which of us is the gymnast — and a flurry of fabric and long arms later, his shirt joins mine at the head of the bunk.

I dive for his neck, kissing and nuzzling as my hands rove over the top of his chest and—God, yes! —his callused fingertips are sliding over my back. I hear myself moan softly against his jugular and he sucks in a breath on a hiss. I roll my hips forward and brush the front of our trousers together.

He’s hard.

He slouches down even further, pulling my hips closer in a steamy rub and his lips glide over my jaw on a direct course for my neck. I don’t fight him. So what if I end up coming first. Maybe he even likes to watch.

That should not turn me on as astronomically much as it does.

I roll my hips again, but the movement only teases, shifts the taut fabric over the damp head of my cock.

I should probably try to slow down—

Trowa twists, caging me in his long arms and legs, and I find myself braced above him and him lying on his back, head on our shirt-mound. “OK?” he breathes, his feet moving down my legs and his hands spanning my lower back, massaging lightly. He waits for me to nod, which I do with a gasped “Yes,” and then he’s urging me flush against him.

Our arousals make contact first, then our bellies, chests, mouths. Oh, God, his mouth.

His knees bend and his feet press against my ass. I thrust against him in a slow roll of my hips. He groans. I do it again. Slow and hard.

“Like this?” I breathe into his ear.
He nods.

“In our shorts again?”

This time his groan is one of annoyance. I pull back far enough to make room for my hand to delve into the front of my pants, grab my cock and angle it up along my belly. Again, Trowa follows my lead and the sight of his hand dipping below the draw-tie waistband of his cotton sleep trousers and moving on the other side of the thin fabric, the sizable bulge he shifts—Jesus.

I yank my hand away and the instant his is clear I’m rubbing against him in a long glide that makes me shudder. Trapped as I am under the heat of his hands and tingling with lust, I bite my lip, exhale a moan, mindlessly surge over his warm skin. Trowa leans up and places a sucking kiss on my neck. His hips rock to and fro and I’m lost to it. I forget to be afraid of giving in, because I already have. I am. I’m his.

Ah, God. The friction along the underside of my cock is just—oh, please—I rotate my hips, sliding us over each other like a blade over a sharpening steel.

“Ngh!” Trowa exclaims softly against my neck.

I do it again.

He clutches me closer, licks my neck, exhales. Oh, fuck.

I keep on with the circular motion of my hips. He mouths my throat. His hands climb and descend my back. Our chests rub together. I’m panting—not caring about anything but the heat and the feel of him and his scent.

“Tro—I’m close,” I warn him as the tingles sharpen into shooting stars of heat.

“Hm,” he invites, his hips rocking faster and—holy fuck, I—

I scramble to get my hand inside my pants, cup the head of my cock as—oh—oh—oh damn—oh yes yes yes. Just… yes. So much yes.

Fuck. Yes.

I remember to breathe. I open my eyes. He’s watching me and his right hand slips from my back and into his own pants. I shift my hips over, give him a smooth landing strip to run on.

Which he does. Quick, short, hard snaps of his hips. His spine arching. His breath held, eyelashes fluttering, but he keeps his eyes open and I watch him back, watch him finish.

He’s beautiful.

I can’t believe it. Him. This. He lets me have and see and touch all of this. Fuck Christmas. I’ll take Tro instead. Just him. As much and as often as I can.

Careful to keep my mess contained in my cupped hand, I lean down and kiss his bare chest. His free hand palms the back of my head, massages my scalp through my braid.

God. Just. This. Forever and ever.

Please.

“Duo,” he breathes and, just like before, his thready voice makes it sound like a thank-you.

When he tilts his chin up for a kiss, I give it to him and use the opportunity to ease our T-shirts out from under his head. I pass him his. I sit up and use mine for clean-up. He’s still watching me as I wipe the last of my release onto the cotton, but hey. It’s cool. I’m still watching him, after all. What can I say? I like the view.

I free-throw shot my used shirt onto my small pile of laundry. Direct hit. My arms fly up in victory.

“And the crowd goes wild! Maxwell wins the game!”

Trowa snorts. A brow arches. “So sure you won’t be needing that in the morning, are you?”

In the morning. I imagine that. Tingles of lust sparkle deep in my pelvis. Damn him.

I murmur, voice pitched low and just-for-him, “If I do, I know who’s gonna be crawling out of bed to get it for me.”

His bare arms pebble with goose bumps. His nipples stiffen. He toughs it out, though, rolling his eyes and giving his head a brief shake. But he doesn’t fool me with this token resistance. I smirk.

He tosses his used shirt away and mauls me beneath the covers with practiced ease, spooning behind me as usual. He nudges my braid aside and I feel his warm lips press a damp kiss to my neck. I shiver. He freezes. Waits for me to freak out on him.

Doesn’t happen.

Amazingly, it doesn’t happen. I’m warm and pleasantly fizzing from within. Doing the cliched afterglow thing. I squirm another millimeter into his arms, lean my hips back into his, and arch my neck in a mute request for one more kiss.

I think he’s smiling when he gives it to me.

Over my belly, I grab his hand. Doodle lazy circles over his knuckles with my fingertips.

“Good night, Tro.”

“Yes, it is, Duo. Good night.”
WARNINGS: discussion of childhood encounter(s) with sexual predators, victimization, and serious (past) mindfuckery (a.k.a. psychological abuse)...

Basically, it's like this: you've gotten a pretty good look at major, life-altering, and formative events in Duo's childhood, so now it's time to glimpse Trowa's. This chapter will probably upset you (because it upsets me), so brace yourself for some really underhanded nastiness and, just, you don't mindfuck people like this (especially children).

Also, you will totally hate the merc captain (and, I'll be honest, it hurt me to do this to the guy because, y'know, I'm kinda in love with the dude as he's portrayed in my "Tomb Raiders" fic).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

... TROWA ...

The audience roars with laughter as the dashingly attired “magician” endeavors to invite, then coax, and even push me into the vanishing cabinet.

All in vain.

I wave my arms frantically, gesticulating toward the ball of cotton candy that he’d pulled from my grasp before hauling me bodily from my spotlight and over to his. I am insistent: I’d earned this treat after that performance with the lion. It’s mine.

With an exaggerated, hopeless roll of his head and shoulders, Duo holds it out to me in resignation.

I jump up and down with happiness. He shoves me into the tall, black, wooden box.

The door shuts.

Laughter seeps in through the cracks, but it’s not dark inside. Duo had rigged a dim light in one corner. I hadn’t even had to ask.

I listen for the musical cue. This is the part where Duo selects a huge, satiny cloth from the rack, walks it over to the cabinet and covers it with a flourish.

I flatten myself against the side wall as the hidden backdoor opens and Savan slides in beside me. Duo’s making mystical gestures now that are supposed to — according to the ringmaster’s introduction — make me disappear. Savan and I arrange ourselves so that we’re enjoying the cotton candy when the cloth drops and the door opens.

We two clowns wave to the audience. Duo grabs for his top hat, staggers back a step, and looks completely flabbergasted.
The crowd guffaws.

Hands on his hips, looking twice as determined now, Duo slams the door shut. At this point, I know he’s supposed to take a moment to consider the cloth he’d just used. He picks it up, points to it, then points to the cabinet, then shakes the cloth as if it’s responsible for the mix-up. He balls it up and tosses it over his shoulder. *Nope,* he tells everyone in silence, *this one’s not working right.*

But that’s fine; he has two more backup “magical” cloths, which he triumphantly gestures to.

Returning to the rack, he retrieves the next one with a dramatic flutter. Savan and I make room.

The cloth whips out with a snap, enveloping the cabinet. The back door opens. Marius squeezes inside. All three of us start munching on the cotton candy.

Duo opens the cabinet door with a grand gesture and a bow, then does a comical double-take.

This trick is not turning out as expected. Instead of vanishing one clown, he seems to be creating more.

The door shuts.

He tries once more with the third cloth. What the audience can’t see is Juan crouched on the other side of the rack, hidden by the massive cut of fabric. We’d had to get the positioning and the lighting just right so that no one catches glimpses of the clowns as, one-by-one, Savan, Marius, and Juan scamper over to the cabinet while Duo holds the cloth precisely, providing just enough cover.

The cabinet is barely large enough for all four of us. We have to exhale and hold our breath, which is why Duo is quick to open the door.

We fall out in a pile. I land on bottom, but I hold the candy up out of the dust.

*Whew!* *That was a close one,* I mime.

The audience is in stitches and Duo is beside himself with frustration. Stomping around and such.

I gesture for Juan to hold my cotton candy: *Carefully, now!*

He takes it with reverence.

I shove Duo into the cabinet. The door closes on his incredulous expression.

Against a backdrop of hilarity, Juan conducts us with the cotton candy as — *one-two-three!* — each of us flutters a “magical” cloth over the cabinet. I spin to the side, prepared to pull off the top cloth. The music builds in a *three-two-one!* The cloths are stripped from the box and I open the door. The cabinet is empty.

I know what delight sounds like, and that’s what surrounds us now. They love this little show that Duo had concocted. Absolutely love it.

It’s all I can do not to turn around and kiss Duo where he’s crouching behind me and the bulk of the cabinet.

Savan struts over to close the door and I toss the cloth in my grasp up with a flourish, covering Duo’s retreat back into the box. The second and third cloths go up.

Juan performs an elaborate series of motions with the cotton candy.
The cloths come down.

The door opens.

Duo is standing there eating cotton candy. It can’t taste all that nice, having spent the last hour being stuffed inside his top hat, but I’ve got to admit it’s a great effect.

The magician emerges from the cabinet and joins the clowns.

We all take a bow, and then the ringmaster directs the attention of the audience up to the high wire and the lovely acrobat, Cathy, who is about to traverse it.

As soon as we duck into the communal dressing room, Duo is keen to know, “How was it? Was I OK?”

I kiss him. I don’t care if Boris and Alvina are watching.

Duo’s eyes are sparkling when I pull back. His grin has never been more carefree or beautiful. “Thanks. You weren’t so bad, yourself.”

I have to rush to get changed out of my clown costume. Luckily, I’ve already got the tights on underneath. I just need the body of the leotard. Duo hands it to me and I shove my clown gear into his arms. “I’ll just make this disappear, yeah?” he jokes.

Alvina smirks at me.

I quirk a brow, daring her to say something.

Boris passes me the sports tape and I wrap my fingers as we watch from the shadows. Cathy does a series of cartwheels across the wire, stopping in the middle to lower herself into a splits. She holds the position. Hidden from the view of the audience, Grigori releases a pair of doves that fly right to her outstretched hands.

As Normin brings out our elephant, Tobu, for a brief floor performance, Boris, Alvina, and I climb up to the trapeze.

“Good show,” I tell Cathy as we pass each other.

“Stay safe,” she answers.

I can’t say that I always do, but I’ve got additional motivation now that I hadn’t had before. The promise of Duo’s warm skin and quick hands. His groans and the sound of my name — “Tro…!” — on a gasp as I tongue his chest and suck his taut belly hard enough to leave a blushing mark and indentations from my teeth in his skin.

Stop.

I have to focus or I’m going to get myself killed and I refuse to imagine how Duo would deal with that.

The lights swerve up to us and we pose on the landing, trapeze swings in hand. Boris takes off and I stop thinking. I fly, reach, grasp. The routine is simple but showy. The applause sounds like space dust against the hull of a shuttle.

Forty minutes, five acts and the grand finale later, I find Duo at his table next to the souvenir stand; he’s gone back to doing simple illusions and tricks for the kids. I’d redressed in my clown costume
and now I’m working the crowd with a bit of juggling and silly acrobatics, getting them to shift their attention away from the big tent and back outside. The show is over, after all. It’s time for them to head home and leave us in peace.

A father kneels beside his daughter at Duo’s table. He’s going to help her guess which tea cup has the little red ball. What they don’t know is that after Duo sets up the trick – one ball, three cups – he slips an identical ball under all of them. Tonight’s voucher is a free posed Polaroid photo with the performer of your choice.

The girl squeals with delight when she wins and clutches the voucher happily. Amazingly, I’m the one she chooses to use it on. I somersault over in response to her shy smile and pointed finger in my direction. But as the father moves closer to be included in the photo and I glimpse his face—

No. Please, no.

Wait.

Stop.

It’s not him. It can’t be.

I’ve never been more thankful for my half-mask and gloves.

I force myself to take a deep breath and really look.

My pulse calms. My palms stop sweating.

He’s not who I’d thought he was. Of course not. There’s a faint resemblance. That’s all.

I pose with the little girl for the photo that Duo obligingly takes. Focusing on him helps me find a smile. While we wait for the the image to appear, I produce a handmade, paper clown puppet from my pocket and deliver it to my young fan with a flourish. Duo gives the photograph to her father. I wave goodbye. They leave.

The last of the stragglers are heading for the exit. Duo comes up next to me. He doesn’t try to touch me. That’s how I know he’d noticed.

“It might be a bad night,” I tell him. I can’t even force an apologetic inflection. My tone is flat. Final.

“OK,” he says. And he keeps on repeating it when I wake from the nightmare. “It’s OK, Tro. It’s OK. I’m right here.”

This is why I hate this city. This is the place that had taught me to obey the captain no matter what.

I draw in a shaky breath. I smell smoke and dust. The taste of blood and sand and dried, salty musk in my mouth. Whenever I have this dream, I take off to sit with the lions. I butcher an early breakfast for them. I consider the feel of fresh blood and the scent of a kill and it pushes the rest of it away into the back of my mind where I wish to hell it would stay.

But it doesn’t. It won’t.

Tonight, as I feel Duo’s strong arms around me, I feel safe enough to face it down. My chest expands slowly, gathering the breath for speech. I squeeze my eyes shut. Bite my lip. I don’t want to give voice to this, but how often have I counseled Duo to let the pain out?
I can’t be a hypocrite now. Later, yes. With Duo, never.

I ask him, “Was there ever a time someone tried to…” I can’t say the word. I try again. “When they wanted—wanted something and you couldn’t—couldn’t stop them?”

“Oh.” It’s barely a breath of sound puffing against my hair. I lift my face from his shoulder. He’d turned on the soft nightlight, the one I’d installed for him for the sake of his nightmares. Tonight, I’m the one who benefits from it.

Just like I’m benefiting from Duo’s presence. I have to admit that he has impressive reflexes. They had kept him on the mattress when my body had been released from the paralysis of sleep and I’d nearly shoved him off of the bunk, caught up in the flee-fight-struggle-helpless-no-no-NO of the dream. Now he’s cradling me, holding me together. For the first time in my life, I don’t feel as if the nightmare is about to crack through my skin, burst—explode my remains onto the walls of the trailer.

“Yeah,” he says.

“Did they…?”

He shakes his head. “Came close a couple of times. L2 rebels,” he explains in response to my stare.

Right. Duo had been with them for four years. He and I both know what kinds of people are drawn to rebellion. Lots of types, some much worse than others.

Duo’s hands rub my arms, my shoulders, my back. I’m lying on top of him, pinning him down, but he doesn’t seem to mind. He volunteers, “After I relieved a coupla them of their gonads, they got the message.”

I snort out a laugh which unfortunately contains a measure of snot. Duo just lifts up his T-shirt and lets me wipe my nose. He doesn’t ask me the same question I’d asked him. I tell him anyway, fill the silence with the ugliness.

“It happened in this city. Sometimes I think I see their faces again.”

He hugs me tighter.

“I was supposed to be the captain’s eyes. He’d lost the right one just about the time he’d taken me in.”

Duo knows as well as I do that you can’t pilot a mobile suit with only one eye. In order to maintain his position in the troupe, the captain had needed a second pair of eyes.

I’d worked hard to learn how to read and narrate the screens and readouts of a mobile suit cockpit. The captain would strap me in with him until I was tall enough to pilot my own suit. I always had his right flank in battle. My standing orders had been simple: never leave his side.

“It was after a battle. We were raiding the city for supplies. I didn’t stick to my post, next to the captain.”

An injured cat. I’d wanted to help it, maybe keep it, and I’d followed it into a ruined building. Right into enemy territory.

I try to burrow deeper into Duo’s chest; my arms snake under his shoulders. Duo’s not as flexible as I am and his legs are shorter, but he does his best to wrap me up in them as well.
“There were five of them. I screamed. Once. Then one hit me—in the face—and they gagged me—” I can still taste it in my mouth: the blood from my nose and the sand and sweat from the dirty handkerchief.

“The troupe heard me. Moved in to surround them. Waited for the captain’s signal. But I didn’t know. I thought I was alone.” I can’t look at Duo as I say the next part. “My pants—off and—the first guy—” The big one was leaning over me, holding me down with just one massive hand on my back, squeezing the air from my lungs, and then I felt it against me and—it was—“There was—nothing I could do.”

Duo hugs me tighter. Rubs his chin against my jaw and ear.

“Right before it—happened, that was when the captain gave the order. Shot them all. And the one about to—he fell on me.” Heavy. Crushing. “I was just—laid out.” Bare-assed. Tied up. Choking.

Duo’s rocking me now, back and forth.

“The captain pulled him off. Cut me loose. Told me to pull my pants up. ‘I could have waited ‘til they were finished with you,’ he said. ‘Don’t you ever disobey a direct order again.’”


I keep talking. I have to. If I stop, all the horror and fury will be stuck inside me forever and I can’t endure another moment of it leeching away at me. “When I dream, I’m waiting for the shots, but the shots never come.”

I brace myself for the inevitable disgust. It’s only a dream. An imaginary continuation of a close-call from years ago, but it still makes my skin crawl and my belly lurch and bile climb up my throat. The filth is—

I flinch away and find myself staring into Duo’s face. I start to pull back.

He doesn’t let me.

Shockingly, he simply pets my bangs aside and continues holding me close. The hand on my shoulder tightens and I gape as rage flickers in his eyes. His jaw clenches. His brows draw together.

“Those shots—they’ll come from now on,” Duo swears, his voice hard with fury. I recognize the sound of it. From the war. This is the exact same edge in him that I’d never been able to see past, the mask that he’d never let me see through… until I’d chased him down because of a dream.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

He vows, “Those fucking shots will come. From the moment they’ve got you cornered. Before the bastard hits you. I’ll kill every last one of them. There is nothing—nothing—that will stop me. There is nothing you could do that would ever make me leave you there. I’ve got your back no matter what.”

I gasp in silence.

Maybe it’s the combination of his voice and my own closed eyelids – the fury and the darkness – that makes it so easy to recall the frenzy of battle in outer space: the first attack of mobile dolls that had been sent out from Libra; a hit that had knocked Heavyarms back; Deathscythe suddenly there,
catching me; Duo’s voice over the comm. asking if I’m OK.

But even before that battle, before I’d regained my memory, he’d given me this:

“I’m the best friend you’ve got!” He had been joking, yes, but he hadn’t been lying, either.

Duo has my back. The relief is… cleansing.

I breathe. I nod. I find my voice. “I know.” I know he has my back. That’s why I’m able to tell him this.

“I come for you,” he says, voice diamond-hard, and when I look up, I see Shinigami in his face. “The God of Death comes for them.”

What is he—oh. This is… unbelievable; Duo is trying to rewrite my horror on a subconscious level so that I never have to suffer the nightmare the same way again. We both know he can’t take the nightmare away completely. But is it possible to change it?

His determination is, frankly, inspiring.

I take a deep breath and meet it: “Do you think, someday, we could…”

His hand pauses in mid-caress.

I stutter on, “You could—” I try to swallow through my desert-dry throat. “—and then I’d know what it’s like?” And I might finally be able to defeat the fear.

I watch him gulp. I’m lying flush against him and I know he understands what I’m asking: this has nothing to do with sex or arousal and I feel it with every passing second as he doesn’t get hard. The sharp gleam of Shinigami’s scythe disappears from his eyes. The God of Death retreats into the folds of his black cloak and is silently tucked away, awaiting his next summoning. It’s just Duo looking at me now and his expression is so scared and sad and sincere.

“If that’s what it’s gonna take, then—” He draws a strengthening breath. His expression locks down with immovable resolution. “—I should go first, not you. That way, I can tell you what to expect.”

My breath catches.

You love me.

I don’t say the words, but I know they’re true. I’ve suspected that Duo loves me since our walk back to the inn after the evening at the liberal arts college. I’ve known it since his breakdown in the communications trailer when his fears had poured out of him and I’d realized how deeply terrified he is of causing me harm. But this is somehow different.

I struggle to puzzle it out.

And then I see it with striking clarity: Duo wants me to be all right. This is more than love, more than a passive affection that is as undemanding as it is unstoppable. Love, despite its power, is containable. It’s easy to love. Too easy. Wanting is harder to keep to yourself. It demands action while love, all by itself, does not. It forges a connection that affects someone other than one’s self. I had wanted Duo to live; I had wanted Duo to choose to live, so I’d worked toward that end. I had wanted Duo to be safe, so I’d arranged for the contract and passports… and now Duo wants me to not just be safe, but to feel safe.
Duo will face my fears first so that he can have my back when I’m ready to do the same.

I cannot think of a single other reason for why he would offer. And not just offer — this isn’t lust or lip-service. He means it.

“I’ve got your back, Trowa,” he repeats, his hands rubbing my arms through the weave of my shirt.

I remember to breathe. I lower my forehead to his shoulder. I relax against him and the T-shirt that’s damp with my snot. I let him have me. I trust him in a way I’ve never trusted anyone.

Always, in my life, my value as a person has come with conditions attached. Not so with Duo even though he’s like me. That’s what makes this so incredible. Cathy knows more about these things, these emotions, than either of us—arguably, both of us combined—but here we are. Somehow, killers like Duo and I have figured it out.

So this is what “unconditional” means.

“Your nightmares,” I begin. I wait for him to tense up but he doesn’t. “I have your back, Duo. I won’t leave you there.” My throat locks down, but mere flesh is no match for the emotion that pushes the words out of me: “You are—I’m home.”

His breathing changes sharply. Like a gasp that could have been a sob if he hadn’t been so shocked. His arms tighten around me. “Me, too, Tro. Me, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Deathscythe does indeed catch and steady Heavyarms during battle in the final episodes of the series and Duo asks Trowa if he’s OK.

“I’m the best friend you’ve got!” is one of Duo’s lines from the scene where he, Quatre, and Trowa are all wearing spacesuits and standing outside their mobile suits, chatting. This is before they go to “Peace Million” and right after Duo shows up and saves Quatre, Trowa, and Noin from attack by a nearby OZ patrol.

I promised to give you a head’s up if I use artistic license on references to the past, so here we go: there’s nothing in the series or official manga (that I’ve seen) to imply that either Duo or Trowa had close calls with sexual predators (as I describe in this chapter). Also, there’s no indication that Trowa/Noname was taken in by the captain of the troupe for a specific purpose. Episode Zero is vague about when the captain lost his right eye. It might have happened after Trowa/Noname joined them.

However, the captain is missing his right eye in A.C. 190. (And it’s my opinion that he’d be at a severe disadvantage in battle; he might even have to give up his command because of it. To avoid that, he might take on a child-apprentice as a navigator and permanent flank-guard. According to Episode Zero, the captain found Trowa/Noname when he was four years old and he was a full-fledged soldier by the age of ten.)

As for Duo’s reaction to the captain’s actions, leaving Trowa there to be essentially tortured (despite having the resources to come to his immediate aid) goes against
everything that Duo, as a leader of a gang, would believe and hold sacred. Though Duo had no formal military training, I believe he understands the term “semper fi” on a soul-deep level.
Forgiveness

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: sexytimes flashback, emotional family stuff

... DUO ...

The mayor of Luxembourg City is a pompous dick with a side-serving of nitwit and a gold-plated ass-nugget on top. But the money’s as good as anywhere else’s. Maybe better, in fact, since the manager boasts that the aforementioned mayor is throwing a shit-ton of it at us.

“Don’t expect a bonus,” the manager warns, but I can tell that everyone’s jazzed up, ready to work for it, knowing they’ve got a good shot at getting it.

I glance Trowa’s way as the meeting adjourns and everyone jumps up to get shit happening. “Any tips for this circus newbie, oh wise and flexible elder of the big top?”

“I always tip for good service.”

Asshole. “So, what you’re saying is if I do your laundry for the next three weeks—”

Cathy butts in on a laugh. “More like if you help him dirty more laundry.”

“Miss Bloom,” I scold with as much affront as I can muster – I know I’m blushing, damn it. “Did your mind just dive into the gutter?”

“You noticed,” she counters. Winks. “What does that say about you?”

“That I’m fluent in myriads of forms of communication.”

Trowa’s brows arch. “Myriads, hm?”

“It’s my word-of-the-day.”

Trowa laughs. Cathy grins at me, shifting so that Trowa can’t see her fingers spell out L-O-V-E at me. I clamp my teeth together so that I don’t stick my tongue out at her. I have to settle for shaking my head and rolling my eyes.

She continues on with her business. I watch her leave, my expression melting into one of regret. I still haven’t made good on my promise to help her tell Trowa that they’re biological siblings.

She’d cornered me couple of weeks ago, but Trowa had still been having nightmares. Not every night and not as bad as the first one, thank God, but he’d still been back in that ruined area of the city, trapped, and hoping for backup too many times.

“Promise me you’ll wake me up,” I’d demanded when we’d settled into bed the next night. We’d gone back to coasting in neutral and that was fine. God forbid his mind try and merge the two
concepts into one terror. “I can’t have your back if you don’t wake me, and I need to be there. OK?”

“OK.”

“You promise to wake me?”

He had.

Sometimes the shots had come early, like I’d tried to promise they would. Sometimes he’d wake up as they stuffed the gag in his mouth. I’d hold him until he fell back asleep each time, eyeing the calendar in the glow of the nightlight, counting down to the end of the month and our time there.

“Not here,” I’d advised Cathy when she’d broached the topic of telling him. Not here. Because what if his mind incorporated Cathy into the dream like I had pulled Trowa into mine? “Maybe Luxembourg City.”

She’d glanced across the yard to where Trowa was hanging up the laundry to dry and sadly wondered aloud, “What happened to my little Trowa here?”

When I hadn’t answered, I suppose she’d gotten a general idea. “It could have been worse” was all I’d dared to say, and then I’d gotten the hell on with mess tent clean-up duty.

That had been a tough city for both of us as it had turned out. After the third nightmare, Trowa had asked me to… y’know. It had killed me to argue against it; the terror of the unknown was just gonna keep on hounding his subconscious, but I’d figured he’d need as many positive associations with it as possible or we were just gonna make things worse. And positive associations just weren’t gonna happen in that place.

But that hadn’t stopped me from heading over to the Godless City Public Library to gather intel. And it hadn’t stopped me from strangling back my discomfort to stop by an adult novelty store for logistics and a reality check.

And now here we are: halfway across the sub-continent and, so far, the nightmares haven’t followed him.

Hopefully, that means Trowa has some good memories—or, hell, even neutral memories—of this place. Not just for the sake of his peace of mind but also because, otherwise, I’m pretty sure Cathy’s going to take her frustration out on me. More than she currently does.

Whatever does or doesn’t happen here between our bunk sheets aside, it’s long past time for Cathy to tell him.

Circus tents, trailers, and operations in general are set up in record time. The souvenir stand is even fully stocked – it turns out that most of the circus staff who aren’t stuck behind the wheel spend the down-time between locations whipping up trinkets for sale. It’s even a bit of a competition to see whose items sell out first. I hadn’t minded driving the whole way this time while Trowa had folded sheets of colored paper into little clown figures. When you pull gently on the figure’s arms, his legs snap together. I hadn’t hidden the fact that I was damn impressed.

“You’re just full of nifty skills,” I’d teased.

He’d smirked. “Play your cards right and I’ll show you more.”

Considering the fact that card tricks are one of my specialties, that right there had been one of those
future facts. When I’d pointed that out – maybe with a tad bit too much cocky anticipation – Trowa had flicked the most recently finished clown doll at me.

“Hey now! Be kind to the paper representation of the circus clown and acrobat I love.”

I’d looked over in time to glimpse the flash of teeth as Trowa had tried unsuccessfullly to bite back a stretchy grin. I’d wished with everything in me that I could have spared a hand to reach out to him, but the rutted road just had not let it happen. I’d given him a good, long, slow kissing later that night, though. And every night thereafter. So I’m pretty sure he knows I’d said what I meant and I meant what I’d said.

“Do I want to know?” Trowa asks. I’m zoning out on him right in the middle of our coffee break.

He’s in his trapeze gear and due for a full rehearsal with Boris, Alvina, and company on the hour, so I say, “Maybe not.”

Which means, of course, he can figure it out. “Last night, hm?”

“Yeah, last night.” When I’d held him close, kissed him and caressed him until he’d made the gear shift out of neutral.

Oh, Jesus.

The feel of his desperate grasp on my hand as he’d nudged my fingers beneath the waist band of his trousers… and then I was feeling him, skin on skin, for the first time, my fingers curling around him and my thumb rubbing over the damp tip as his spine had twisted and his breaths had shortened, and I was feeling his entire body undulate against mine and watching him seek my touch again and again and again with unrestrained need until he’d come—

Whew!

Now I’m getting all hot and bothered.

“Suppose I return the favor later?” he muses, his green eyes glittering with heat.

“Suppose you do,” I manage to reply, trying not to think about him leaning over me as his hand works me slow and firm. Last night, I’d been so turned on that I’d come at just about the same time as him, just from rubbing against his thigh. Through both our damn trousers. Still… “I wouldn’t say ‘no’ to an encore, though.”

“No truck engine metaphors today?”

I grin. “You gonna lemme lube your piston?”

Trowa covers his face with both hands. “I hate you,” he mutters.

“You love me,” I insist.

“Same thing.”

The entrance to the mess tent flutters and Grigori ducks inside with a scowl. “Duo. People here. For see you. Tell them go.”

My brows lift. I’m both amazed that I have visitors and that Grigori had delivered the message instead of letting his bear, Keiko, eat them.
“I’ll take care of your mug,” Trowa offers and that’s how I know just how close the visitors are to becoming bear-chow.

I brace a hand on Tro’s shoulder as I stand up from my rickety, metal folding chair. “If I’m not back in ten minutes, deploy the Gundams.”

“Copy that.”

I rub the pad of my thumb over the back of his neck, and then I’m jogging out of the tent and into the overcast afternoon. I hope it doesn’t rain. Not on opening night. We’re supposed to set off fireworks.

Considering the identity of the messenger, I take a guess that my visitors are near the animal cages. I’m right.

Ernest and Mara Franklin are contemplating Tobu’s soulful elephant eyes as Normin gives them a lecture on pachyderm trivia.

I’m glad they don’t notice me right away. I need a moment. To consider going for backup. I study them, trying to gain some clue as to their intentions. The journal tucked carefully into the crook of Ernest’s elbow is a surprise. One that—I mean, if this is going where I think it might be headed, then—

I take a step back, aiming for a shadow.

Tobu lifts her trunk in my direction. Mara turns and of course she sees me. God damn it. I make a mental note to have a little chat with Normin about his darling, three-ton tattletale.

“Duo!” Mara calls softly, mindful of the large, easily agitated animals.

Ernest startles and pivots around. I don’t see the same warmth or welcome in his body language that he’d just about smothered me with at the airport.

I glance at the journal.

I take in Mara’s warm smile.

I study Ernest’s tense posture.

I’m confused. And I’ll be damned if we’re just gonna stand around here while Miffy, the tiger, licks her chops at us.


They stare at me. I stare at them. Keiko, the bear, stares, too. Maybe because she’s hungry.

Time for an extraction. I think of the communications trailer, but I know we all won’t fit. Hell, there’s more room in the vanishing cabinet that Roman, the lighting and music tech, had helped me build. There’s the “lobby” — for lack of a better word — of the big top where the souvenir and concession booths are, but I discard that location as well: too much casual traffic.

Right. That leaves just one option left. I don’t like it, but it’s the only spot where we can have a private word. So long as no one starts screaming at the top of their lungs. Like Savan and Alvina last Thursday.
I’d learned way too much about all the domestic chores Savan seems to think are magically done by kindly, nocturnal elves.

Anywho.

With a sigh, I gesture for Ernest and Mara to follow me. “C’mon,” I reluctantly invite. “I know a place where we can talk.”

I lead them to the trailer. Our trailer. Well, Trowa’s trailer. He’s the one who’d saved up and bought the damn thing, after all. But I’m pretty sure that the fact that I can claim half of the dirty laundry inside is one of those “possession is nine-tenths of the law” deals.

Still, just to be on the safe side, I knock. I poke my head inside and perform a quick visual survey. Things are decently clean and organized. Our unwashed laundry is tucked under a spare bunk in separate cardboard banana cartons. Yeah. Classy, huh?

At least the bunks are all made. The covers on ours is a bit skewed because it’d been my turn to make it this morning. I push the door open wide and wave for Ernest and Mara to enter.

“Have a seat,” I tell them, nodding toward the three bunks. “Would you like something to drink? We have water and—”

“I,” he begins. At his sides, his hands curl into tight fists. I don’t blame him. How many people had I hurt — how many soldiers had I eagerly and resolutely killed — in an effort to ease just a little of the pain? If pummeling me is what he thinks he needs, I can’t and won’t begrudge him.

“I still don’t want to believe it,” he tells me gruffly. “I wish it hadn’t happened at all. None of it.”
Ditto. I nod once. There are only so many times and ways a person can apologize before it just starts sounding like empty bullshit. Sometimes saying nothing is better.

In a sudden move which would have triggered my reflexes if not my training — would have had me responding with lethal force if I hadn’t been actively suppressing it in anticipation of an attack — Ernest grabs my arms and yanks me close.

I go willingly. Trowa will be pissed that I got the snot beaten out of me. The thought of disappointing him hurts more than the prospect of the oncoming thrashing.

_Fight back_, the lost little boy in me roars, still surviving off of anger.

But there’s one fact I’ve learned that he hasn’t: there’s no fighting Death.

I guess, in a way, what Ernest does to me is a kind of execution.

He wraps his arms around me and holds me tightly. Very tightly. And he tells me in a voice that’s choked with emotion, “It wasn’t your fault, Jesse—Duo, it wasn’t your fault.”

I clench my jaw as the words sear through me like flash-fire, covering my soul in thick blanket of ash.

“You were just a lad, doing the best you could, doing what you thought was right. Your dad would be proud. He is proud, I’m sure. So very proud of you.”

Oh, God. The pain is unbelievable. Worse than what OZ had put me through. Both times combined. So much worse. My knees sag. I grab onto the only thing within reach: Ernest Franklin.

I hold on. If I don’t, I’ll be swept out into the darkness, drifting into outer space.

But then a second pair of arms arrives. Warmth against my side. Mara helps hold me up. She strokes my hair and I feel tears burning my eyes.

I want Trowa. I wish he were here.

Maybe he is. Has it been ten minutes? Had he seen me heading this way?

“Come stay with us for a bit,” Ernest implores. “It’d be so good to have you. To be a family.”

Drawing a deep breath — the smell is wrong because it’s not Trowa’s — I pull back. “I appreciate that.” I barely recognize the voice as my own. It sounds like it’s been turned up-down and out and then shredded by Miffy. “But I can’t leave right now.” I literally cannot afford to. And, anyway, Trowa deserves to have his say in all this.

“The invitation stands, lad,” Ernest assures me. “When you’re ready.”

I don’t know if I ever will be.

“Thanks.” The best grin I’ve got wobbles on my lips. That’s when I know I’m overdue for backup. I lean over and take a chance. I knock once on the door.

It opens. I exhale at the sight of Trowa standing on the other side of the threshold. He takes in the scene with a sweep of his gaze and then he ducks inside, crowding against me rather than pushing into Ernest and Mara’s space.

I don’t doubt that Trowa had heard most of that, especially the last part, but I say for the benefit of
my uncle and aunt, “We might be able to manage a short visit. Dunno when, though.”

“That’s fine,” Mara insists.

Ernest is looking from me to Trowa. “We’ve a guest room that you’re both more than welcome to share. Or you can make your own arrangements.”

I ask Trowa, “You’ve still got their number?”

He nods.

“I’ll give you a call,” I kinda-sorta promise. “When we’re gonna be free.”

That pretty much settles it. Trowa and I walk them out, avoiding the animals because Grigori is probably working with Keiko right now and the fewer distractions the better.

At the parking lot where the Franklins’ rental car waits, I’m given another warm hug by Mara and a strong embrace by Ernest, who surprises me by holding out his hand for Trowa to take next.

“Thank you for making this possible.”

“My pleasure.”

I wave as they drive off. The car turns out of sight. Trowa slides an arm over my shoulders and I plant my face against his chest before letting out a shuddering breath.

He sums up, “They forgave you.”

Words are just not happening right now. Not through this locked-down throat. I nod.

Trowa’s hands rub my back and I’m completely and totally amazed that he doesn’t give a rat’s smelly ass that he’s standing out here in the open wearing nothing but a pair of old leggings and a leotard. Jesus Christ. The guy is incredible.

I clear my throat with an effort. It takes a couple of tries, but I manage to say, “You don’t sound surprised.”

He shrugs a shoulder. I can feel it. “I wouldn’t have let them come see you if that wasn’t on the agenda.”

Wait. What? I pull back. Shake my head. Sigh. No wonder he’d let me go off to greet my “visitors” all on my own. If he hadn’t known who they were, he’d have insisted on coming with me. Hell, he’d have gotten us weaponized first. More so than we usually are, that is.

Jesus. I’d been expecting one of Howard’s guys, but it could have been anyone: a rebel from L2 that I’d pissed off when I wouldn’t sign myself and Deathscythe up for their half-assed cause, a former Ozzie looking for revenge, a family member on the warpath for blood and justice against the Gundam pilot who’d killed their loved one.

I lean back and squint at him.

“You’re a sneaky one, Tro,” I sort of gripe.

He gives me that fucking Who, me? look that tempts me to punch him in the arm. But I don’t. He needs that arm for his acrobat shit-and-what. Still. If he’s not gonna own up to it, then I guess it’s up to me to spell it out.
“Oh, shall I count the ways?” Obligingly, I list them, poking him in the chest with each point I make, “There was your con for ‘bumping into me’ in outer space; then your secret midnight massages to get me to sleep through the night; the legal papers and other documents; contacting the Franklins—twice!” I shake my head. There’s more: the way he’d gotten his, er, point across over that damn pool game wager springs immediately to mind.

“Yes and no. But as I can’t even explain to myself why it bothers me, I just shrug and say, “This is how you work. I get that.”

He blinks. His lips curve into a smile that I’ve never seen before. Kind of soft and charmed and tremulous. I don’t know what I’d said to prompt it, but if I don’t pull off a snappy one-liner, I think we’re both gonna cry.

“No buts. Just don’t you forget: I’m the stealth expert here.”

Trowa pulls me close. I tighten my arms around his waist. I can feel the curve of his lips against my forehead. “You are. I’ve learned from the best.”
A Planned Experiment

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: smut -- ALL THE SMUTS (yes, you read that right -- the sex-ay happens)

... TROWA ...


Above me, he draws a deep breath in. Lets it out. If he’s in pain, I can’t see it in his expression. But then, both of us are experts at hiding the worst agonies imaginable.

“I’m OK. It’s OK.” He pauses. Swallows. I try not to look at him, at all the bare skin and scars and his hard arousal.

I still can’t believe he’s doing this for me.

He licks his lips. Opens his eyes and reports, “I’m not gonna lie. It burns. Kinda like when you scrape your hands and then you forget about it and run hot water over ‘em.”

I hiss in sympathy. I’d withdraw, I’d lift him off of me, but he’d already warned me not to.

“And it’s kind of amazing,” he continues, a shockingly gentle smile curving his lips, “because a part of you is inside me.”

His flushed cock twitches.

He arches a brow. “Needless to say, that’s kind of a turn-on.”

“You… like it?”

“Maybe. Can I move?”

“You can do whatever you want.”

He leans forward, crouching over me, and lifts his hips.

I gasp at the friction. Ah, fuck, what I wouldn’t give to be able to move my hips, but I don’t. I won’t. Not unless he asks me to.

I bite back a groan as he lowers himself again. “How is it now?” I force myself to enunciate.

“Kinda nice, actually. Can I do it again?”

My anticipation and his eagerness makes me harden even further inside the condom. Duo’s eyes widen; he’s noticed. Of course. How could he not.
“Wow.” He lifts up and settles back down a little faster this time and I think I might just lose my mind. Then he sits up and I’m so deep inside him that a moan ekes out through my nose.

“Duo!” I gasp.

He thrusts forward.

My hands pull at the sheet that my fingers have curled into.

He wiggles, a circular motion of his hips that is so unbelievably sexy that I have to tell him to —“Stop. Stop or I’ll move.”

“Maybe I want you to.” I eye his wicked grin. “C’mon, Tro. Gimme a boost.”

I rock my hips forward and his breath stops. His eyes widen on a gasp.

I freeze. No. Oh, no. Have I hurt him already?

Before the fear can cause me to soften, Duo bows forward on a groan. “Oh, shit. That was—holy God. Do it again. Please.”

I repeat the motion. His head snaps back and his teeth clamp together. I can hear his in-drawn breath hissing between his lips. His pelvis rolls over mine and doesn’t stop. A rhythm.

Oh.

Oh, Duo.

Are we really—this was just supposed to be an experiment—he can’t honestly want—!

“Tro, please. I’m begging you. Work with me here.”

I meet his thrusts and his mouth falls open, his entire torso arches into the motion. I reach for his hips and he quickly grabs my hands, positions them. “Like this,” he teaches me and then he’s groaning, his lithe hips rocking in my grasp over my cock which is so hard and he feels so amazing everywhere around me.

“Oh, God,” he breathes. “I know this wasn’t the plan, but—oh, damn, yes! Right—just—there—fuck!”

I’m in awe as he bites his lip, looks at me with pleading eyes.

“Can I—like this, Tro? Are you OK?”

I nod, rendered mute from the heat—even through the condom he’s so hot and tight and everywhere.

He reaches for his cock and watching him touch himself as he rides me—“aah!”—it is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, felt, wanted, needed. The arousal flays me, turning my skin inside out and the burn sweeps over every inch of me in a tidal wave of mindless instinct. I don’t even notice that my hips are moving faster, that I’m arching up against the bed, until it’s too late.

Splashes hit my belly and chest as Duo grits his teeth and sways against the rush pulsing through him. I moan sharply as he squeezes around me and, suddenly, I’m lost to searing white starbursts that go on and on and on.

Until there’s darkness.
I breathe.

Damn it. I’ve closed my eyes. I feel disappointed in myself somehow.

And then I remember; it hadn’t supposed to happen like this. We’d been planning to just test things. Once Duo had given his report, I was supposed to let myself get soft again. Neither one of us had been supposed to like it. But this—

This had been a surprise.

I open my eyes, my hands petting whatever I can reach of Duo: his thighs and sides and chest. He’s crouching over me again. His hands grip his own thighs and his elbows are locked, holding himself upright. Our bodies still joined. He’s panting hard.

“Holy. Fuck. Trowa,” he wheezes, looking up at me with a sparkling-eyed grin. “If you—ever—wanna—do that—again—I am all in.”

I laugh. “I think that’s supposed to be my line.” I glance pointedly at our hips.

Duo tries to look apologetic, but he’s smirking too widely to pull it off. “Whoops. What meant to say was, ‘Way to put it in overdrive.’”

My head falls back onto the pillow with a groan. “What is it with you and trucks?”

“I like trucks,” he defends. “C’mon, Tro. Don’t leave me hangin’.”

I peel open one eyelid. Incredibly, he’s expecting a high-five. Oh, fine then. It’s easier to just give it to him; I don’t have the energy to be indignant.

Our palms smack together in a victory salute and that’s precisely when he shifts and I slip out of him.

“Permission to decommission the artillery, sir?”

I cover my face with my hands. I cannot believe him. “Proceed with caution.” I can’t believe I’m playing along.

But the end result is more than satisfactory: Duo gets us both cleaned up. Hands me a pair of clean underwear and a T-shirt. Likewise attired, he lies down next to me and reaches up to turn off the light. I catch his wrist, forestalling the action, and lean up and over his shoulder for a kiss.

Duo Maxwell is the strongest, bravest, most incredible person I know.

He rolls his eyes when I tell him this, draws a breath to argue.

I kiss him again. “We can debate it after I’ve had my turn.”

“Your turn, huh? I dunno if I’m gonna let ya. It was pretty spectacular.”

“You’re not going to make me beg, are you?”

He kisses me softly and sweetly. “Not yet. But don’t think I’m lettin’ you off the hook.”

“Never. I’m caught.”

“Hah. Fishing pun. Nice.”
“Have you ever been fishing?” I ask suddenly.

He snorts.

“I’ll take you sometime,” I promise before he can say something that makes me angry. Not at him, but at the circumstances that have denied him so much in his life.

“It’s a date.”

I turn out the light.

Neither one of us has nightmares.

It’s another small victory during our stay in Luxembourg City. We only have a week left, and working at the circus has never been more enjoyable from a creature comfort standpoint — there are enough utilities hook-ups for all the trailers so we can enjoy power and running water in total privacy — but we have never worked harder.

Despite that, or perhaps because Duo and I have so little time together during the day, our nights had been getting progressively more daring. Over the last two weeks, we’d gradually stripped down to our skin. We’d let our hands roam any and everywhere, learning each other’s bodies until Duo had proposed going ahead with the mission we’d tentatively outlined in March.

Last night, it had happened.

Oh, God. I cannot let myself think about it now. I’m supposed to be practicing the high wire routine that Cathy and I are performing tonight.

The second time I miss my cue, she sighs and points me over to the landing platform. I go. I need to get my head together.

I sit. She sits next to me. “So, I’m guessing since you weren’t the one wincing and squirming in your chair at breakfast this morning, that Duo bottomed for you.”

I bury my face in my hands. Wish for death. Damn the safety net.

Cathy pats my leg. “I’m glad you’re happy together, Trowa.”

“But?” I mumble.

“But I wish you’d gotten around to it sooner. I’ve lost twenty creds and Alvina is going to be a real ‘queen of the big top’ now.”

I groan. Cathy pats my shoulder this time. “Just do one thing.”

I drop my hands and stare at her in resignation. “What?”

“Trust Duo.” She smirks. Pats my shoulder again. “C’mon. If you hit your cue, we might manage to make it to lunch on time.”

Something in her tone puts me on my guard, but I don’t demand details. I’m finally able to find an equilibrium that’s close enough to normal to do a passably decent job at the high wire routine.

Cathy just about skips over to the mess area, holding the flap open for me. With a suspicious look her way, I duck inside. Duo’s already there, wiggling as subtly as he can manage on the hard, folding chair. Everyone is present, even the manager who is doing his best to ignore the snickers and
sidelong looks that Duo is getting.

“Hey, Trowa!” Juan calls out. “Maybe you can tell us what’s wrong with Duo, eh?”

“Has somebody got ants in their pants?” Marius guesses.

Duo bows his head over his tray of stew and I feel wretched. Just absolutely wretched for all of this. Last night had been a mistake. I never should have agreed when he’d insisted on going first. Hell, I never should have asked Duo to help me defeat that damned nightmare in the first place, and now Duo is—

Wait.

Just what the hell is he doing?

He’s standing up, knocking his chair over with a clatter, and banging his spoon on the table. “OK, people. Your attention please. I have an announcement.”

Cathy clutches my arm, either to keep me from killing everyone in the room or to stop me from dragging Duo the hell away from here forever.

Duo throws his arms wide and declares with pomp worthy of a ringmaster, “I’d like to take this opportunity to confirm your suspicions. Yes, Trowa popped my cherry last night.”

Wolf whistles start up, but Duo cuts them off with a gesture. “If you will please hold your applause ‘til the end? Ahem. Thank you. As I was saying. Cherry status: popped. You may now fork over your cash to the winning party. Alvina? I heard a rumor that it just might be you.”

A rumor? When did Duo—how long has this been going on—what?

“It looks like it is,” she agrees with a fat grin. Grumbling, everyone with the exception of the manager gets up and slaps creds into her outstretched hand.

Even Cathy. “Sorry, Trowa,” she chirps irreverently, breezing past to relinquish twenty creds as I stand here gawking.

I want to die.

I want to kill everyone in this room.

I’m unable to move.

Duo isn’t finished. He saunters over to Alvina who is thumbing through her ill-gotten gains with open glee. He holds out his hand. “For that confirmation, I figure fifty percent sounds about right.”

Her jaw drops.

For a brief instant, I’m as stunned as she is… and then it clicks.

My lips curve into a smug grin.

The mess hall devolves into laughter and the pounding of fists on abused tables.

“Twenty-five,” she negotiates, a shrewd gleam in her eyes.

Duo pulls a throwing knife from his belt and taps it against his pursed lips with a thoughtful nod. “I
Duo doesn’t even look away from her before his left wrist flicks out. The blade whistles through the air and lands with a solid **thunk!** right on the notice board… upon which a calendar had been tacked. The knife is squarely buried on today’s date.

“Fifty,” Duo says in a tone that is very final.

Alvina hands over the cash.

“A pleasure doing business with you!”

Duo spins around on his heels and makes a bee-line right toward me, grinning and swaggering and —and I think I’m not worthy.

He steps up to me, taps the wad of bills against my chest and says, “Boom. Bonus. See now, that’s how it’s done.”

I disagree. I step even closer and angle my head down. Catch his mouth with mine. Kiss him long and deep to the sound of applause and catcalls and a shout of “Take it back to your trailer already!”

Pulling away, I murmur, “Now **that’s** how it’s done.”

His grin has never been wider, I am sure. When he retakes his seat, he does so with his usual panache. Not a wiggle or squirm to be seen. He’d totally set all that up. What a con man.

I can see it when everyone else figures it out; their respect for Duo goes up visibly. Even the manager is giving the throwing knife that’s still stuck in the board a speculative look. Yes, Duo Maxwell is a natural at circus life. Definitely.

I smile all the way through lunch.

Later that night, after another successful show, Duo slips half his share from Alvina’s winnings into my jeans front pocket.

“What’s this for?”

Duo shrugs, handing me a steaming mug of hot soup. It’s too late for caffeine. Not if we’re going to finish off the week with a flawless grand finale. No one can afford to lose sleep for something as frivolous as a cup of coffee at eleven o’clock at night. What a genuine shame.

Duo points out, “I didn’t do any cherry popping by myself now, did I?”

“It was your swindle.” From start to finish. I wonder how long he’d known about the betting. Had he chosen the “winning” day based on the likelihood of being able to intimidate the winner into sharing his or her gains, calculating for maximum profit? Given that Cathy had seemed to anticipate his scheme, had he asked her who would make the best mark? I wonder for a moment and then I decide it doesn’t matter. If he **had** set the whole thing up, I’m mercenary enough to appreciate his strategy. If he **hadn’t,** well, I’m still enough of a soldier to admire how quickly he’d capitalized on the opportunity.

Duo boasts, “Just one of the perks of sharing your trailer with a morally ambiguous magician.”

I chuckle and wrap an arm around his waist. He drapes his along my back and curls his hand around my shoulder. The lights of the city are laid out before us, but Duo and I both look up. It’s too bright
to see the stars.

He sighs.

I inquire, “Are you going to call Ernest and Mara?”

“Hm?”

“Seeing as how we got our bonuses early…” I trail off.

“Heh. So true.” He pauses. Gets quiet and tense. “You gonna come with me?”


Duo’s body relaxes against my side and I give myself to the moment. Wrap myself up in it. Live in it. Hoard it with my collection of joys and pleasures, so many of which are gifts from Duo.

I shift my hand up to nudge his braid aside and massage the nape of his neck. “Hmm,” he appreciates, practically purring. His arm slithers down and around my waist, fitting us against each other, side-to-side. Or would it be joined at the hip?

I feel myself smile.

He checks, “Edinburgh? Two days after the finale?”

It doesn’t surprise me that Duo wants to help with packing up. We’re all still waiting on those unpromised bonuses, after all. “That’s fine.”

And it will be. It’ll be fine. Just fine.

He nuzzles against my sweater-covered shoulder. “Trowa?”

“Yeah, Duo?”

“I’m real sorry if I embarrassed you today. I just—I overheard Savan and Juan talking about their bets and I know I should’ve gone to you instead of Cathy, but I—this is gonna sound so dumb,” he grumbles.

Before I can do more than give him an inquisitive look, he blurts, “I wanted to impress you.”

“I am completely impressed.”

He leans against me, shifting further into our embrace and his compulsion to be truthful makes him continue despite the fact that he’s clearly preaching to the choir. “And besides, if we didn’t meet all that shit head-on, we’d never hear the end of it.”

I’m still smiling. “I know.”

His hand slithers beneath the hem of my reclaimed sweater, the sweater he’d appropriated from me and then promised to return if I handed over myself into his keeping. How completely ridiculous. How could he not have known that I’d already been his for the having?

Duo’s palm smooths up and then down my spine. “Last night was really, really good.”

“For me, too.” Surprisingly good in all the best ways. Seeing Duo’s pleasure had dissipated the
lion’s share of the nebulous fear that had been hanging low and ominous in my mind for a very long time. The fear that it was intended to hurt, that it couldn’t be good no matter how prepared or careful I — we — might be.

His fingers begin tracing the edges of my scars, his touch firm and warm. I slouch into it.

He says, “And I want you to know, despite the act I put on today and the shit I said in the mess tent, it counts.”

I look at him and find him looking at me, reminding me of a February night under a colony streetlamp. Here again is the same look in his dark eyes. I think I can read it now. It still makes my heart pound.

I kiss him, our lips brushing and then clinging, moving in counterpoint to the muffled sounds of a distant city settling down for sleep. Our soup gets cold. Neither of us care.
“Déjà vu,” Cathy muses aloud. Her smile has an edge to it as she watches me fold a pair of cotton sleep pants into my duffel bag.

“Yeah,” I agree. “But I’ll be coming back sooner this time.”

Her eyebrows arch. “You’re sure? Won’t Duo want to stay and get reacquainted with his family for a while?”

“I’m sure he will.”

There’s a telling pause. I can almost feel Cathy’s eyes narrowing. “You’re not planning on staying with him.”

“If everything goes well,” I say with indifference that I absolutely do not feel, “I’ll just be in the way.” I’m proud of the lack of inflection in my voice. It’s the first step in stepping back, in letting Duo move forward. I’ve managed not to think about this for days. It had been the furthest thing from my mind through the finale and hard days of packing up, but now there’s no avoiding it. So I don’t.

Cathy snorts. “You are, without a doubt, a moron.”

My hands pause as I reach for the sock balls I’m intending to pack. I look at her, meet the challenge in her eyes: how am I being a moron in wanting what’s best for him? He’s given me so much. How can I deny him this?

I’ve never tried to hold anyone back be they a friend, comrade, or acquaintance. Heero Yuy and Wufei Chang can both attest to that. So can Quatre, I suppose. When it’s time to part ways, that’s what happens. Duo Maxwell will go wherever he likes whenever he likes. He won’t let me stop him. He shouldn’t let me stop him.

Besides, I owe him. Above all else, Duo is my friend. He needs what the Franklins are offering him. He has a right to it.

Cathy simply doesn’t understand that.

The trailer door opens, admitting Duo and his freshly laundered clothes.

“Hey,” he says, looking from my idle hands to Cathy’s intimidating stare. “Am I... interrupting
“something?”

“Yes. Thank you.” I’m relieved that I manage a believable monotone before resuming my task.

Cathy sighs at me and then gives Duo a warm smile. “Good luck, Duo.”

“Thanks, Cath.”

The two of them are silent for a moment, sharing a look of understanding that escapes me. Duo nods in response to something she doesn’t say. Doesn’t need to say. “Sorry for taking off again like this. I’ll have Trowa back with y’all before you know it.”

My hands are thankfully buried deep in my duffel bag, otherwise both Cathy and Duo would have seen them curl into fists.

“Keep an eye on my little Trowa,” she tells Duo.

Duo makes a poor attempt at swallowing back his laughter. He looks over at me. I quirk a brow on cue; I’m taller than either of them.

“Yeah, sure,” Duo says lightly. “No problem.”

I roll my eyes.

Duo sets his box of clean clothes down on the nearest unused bunk and turns back toward Cathy to offer her a hug. Something deep in my chest twinges.

Cathy doesn’t skimp on her farewell. She pulls Duo so close that he’s practically smothered in her thick, auburn hair. “Take care, Duo. And remember you’ve always got a home here, just in case this other one doesn’t work out.”

He leans back, blinking with surprise. “What’s all this? Has Alvina convinced the manager to get rid of me or something?”

“Of course not!”

He tweaks her chin with a light bump from his fist. “Then I’ll catch ya on the flip-side.”

“Yeah. I just want to make sure you know you’re always welcome here with us.”

“Thanks,” he says in a subdued tone. “That means a lot to me.”

“You mean a lot to me,” she confides in a whisper that’s almost too soft for me to hear. But I do hear it, echo it, wish I could say it except it’ll only make things harder in the end.

All things must end eventually.

She orders, “So you’d better come back soon, Duo Maxwell.”

Duo summons a cheerful grin. “Count on it, Catherine Bloom.”

“I will,” she assures him, finally moving toward the open door. It’s late and Duo and I have an early start tomorrow.

Duo watches her step outside, glances my way, and suddenly frowns. “Hey, hold up there, Cath. Aren’t you gonna give Tro-bear a hug?”
Turning in the doorway, Cathy informs both of us in a loud voice and with a militant gleam in her eyes, “Trowa doesn’t need a hug. He needs a swift kick in the pants. Have a good trip, guys!”

The trailer door slams closed behind her.

Duo considers her dramatic exit for a moment before demanding of me, “Dude, what did you do to piss her off so bad?”

I shrug. The duffel zipper screams shut. “She knows I don’t do goodbyes.”

“Hm,” Duo replies, noting that detail. Noting everything. “What’s up, Tro?”

I don’t know how to answer that with words, so I turn, place my bag next to his still-empty backpack, and run my hand down the center of his back. The muscles relax instantly beneath my touch and then his spine flexes. In the next instant, his arms are around my waist and our mouths are moving together in choreographed motions. Familiar. Comforting.

I want this. More of this. An indefinite of this.

I want in vain.

But if I don’t ask him for one more thing before we leave, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life. I don’t have room in my soul for any more regret. Especially not this one.

I breathe my request against his lips, “Let me have my turn tonight. Please?”

Though he’d joked about enjoying it too much to give it up so soon, he nods readily. “So long as you promise to tell me to stop if it gets to be too much.”

“Too much?”

“It’s pretty intense,” he confides, his hands rubbing up and down my back, above my waist.

I nod. I promise. He kisses me. Nuzzles my neck. Pulls back when I move to take my shirt off and then his hands and lips are on my chest and I have to sit down. Hold onto him. I keep holding onto him. He pulls down a small, plain cardboard box of necessities from an overhead cupboard, undresses me and then himself. He lays me down. I open my legs.

“Not yet, Tro,” he breathes, placing butterfly kisses on my neck. He pets the side my thigh from hip to knee. “Shh, not yet.”

Oh, God. This isn’t like last time when he’d been so factual and methodical as he’d prepared himself and me. This isn’t an experiment. He’s not going to show me how it works, how it feels. That’s not what this is.

Duo is making love to me.

Tears rush to my eyes in a hot wave. I wish he wouldn’t. I wish he’d stop. My nightmare isn’t about a lack of love; it’s about violation, degradation, and helplessness. It’s about abandonment and scorn and punishment. It’s about pain. Physical pain being the least of them, but the simplest to address. I’d hoped that banishing the fear of the physical pain would empower me in facing down the others.

I’ve never felt more powerless than I do right now.

But I don’t stop him. Not his hands as they sweep over my skin. Not his mouth as his lips move
with mine, our tongues brushing in a soft rasp that makes me shiver with heat. He leans back, kissing a path down my throat and chest. His hands sweep up from my hips and he gathers my swelling arousal in his dexterous fingers.

I moan. My hips flex. He’s learned just how to touch me, how to make my mind blank and my body obey his gentle commands. Oh. Duo. Please. Don’t stop.

I have no idea if I say the words aloud or not. It doesn’t matter; Duo doesn’t hesitate when I shift my weight, move one leg, bend my knee and lean it against the wall. Giving him access. He tugs gently on my cock, rolls my balls just how I like, then tries something new. He begins a firm massage below them.

“OK?” he checks.

I nod. It’s different from the immediate, surface-skin sensation along my arousal. It’s deeper. It’s down in my core. I decide, after a minute of patient attention, that I like it. I roll my hips closer, into his touch and—oh. Yes. I like this.

Duo is straddling my other leg, his balls resting on my thigh. “Let me…” I begin, moving my leg, our skin rubbing. Duo obliges. Kneels between my spread thighs and I’m not nervous or afraid or even bracing myself for what’s coming. I simply feel as his hands introduce me to unanticipated sensations.

He rubs my tender, inner thighs and I widen my legs further. He drags a fingertip along the underside of my cock, draws circles over my balls, massages that spot just below them, and then one finger ghosts over my pucker.

Oh.

I’m sensitive there. I hadn’t realized. The fear had been too strong for me to notice.

There’s no fear now and I can’t not notice.

Another passing touch.

My eyelashes flutter.

“OK?” Duo checks again.

“Very,” I breathe.

He plays the surface of my body gently for a long time. I’m hard, but it doesn’t ache. I want, but I’m able to wait.

“We can stop here,” he offers, curling his fingers around my cock and rubbing the tip with his thumb even as he continues teasing my entrance. “Just this.”

I shake my head. “Show me all of it.”

He does. Slowly. I sink into every phase as we move forward. The slickness of his fingers, circling and massaging me until I open. The oddness of one finger sliding within as I bear down. The sureness of it as Duo narrates how each new sensation should feel.

All of this is new. But I’m not afraid. I’m safe. Here, with him, I’m safe.

Two fingers. Stretching. Slicking me inside.
“This is gonna sting a little,” he warns, pulling back and pressing forward with three.

My breath hisses in through my nose, but I don’t tell him to stop. He’s right; it stings, but he’s not hurting me.

Gradually, it eases. I relax into it.

Again, Duo offers to stop here. His cock is flushed and hard and leaking, but he’s watching me. Only me. Again, I ask him to keep going.

“Lemme lie down,” he says. He doesn’t want to pin me, frighten me. It doesn’t matter. I’m helpless, either way. But I let him take my spot. I crouch over him as he rolls on the condom. Slathers the top portion with lubricant. I hand him a towelette. He carefully cleans his hands.

Then he reaches for me, urges my face toward his. He kisses me with so much loving passion that heat flushes over every inch of my body. “You’re in the driver’s seat,” he says, pulling back and tucking his hands beneath the pillow under his head. “Just go easy on the clutch.”

I breathe out a laugh along with whatever tension might have still been lurking in me. I circle the base of his cock with my fingers, angle the head against my entrance, and let him in.

“Slower!” he chokes out almost immediately and I concur with a wince. I have to concentrate, contrarily push back against him in order to ease his entry.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck,” he pants out before forcing himself to inhale slowly and deeply.

“Sorry,” I say.

“You need to stop?” he grits out.

“No, I—for not telling you what to expect.”

His lips quirk. “’s OK. I think I’ll live.”

I chuckle. He presses deeper. My humor vanishes. “You’re right. It burns.” A chemical burn sizzling directly along my nerves—no skin to provide a buffer.

“Just—slow, OK? Breathe, Tro. You can stop anytime. Just don’t pull off. Let me think about lion shit until I’m not so hard, yeah?”

I nod. I haven’t forgotten this rule. Still, I tease, “What’s wrong with lion shit?”

He chuckles and his cock follows the movement. Interesting. Still burning a bit, but interesting.

“God damn your turd fetish,” he retorts.

I seat myself. I can feel his tensed thighs and his hipbones and his cock... I feel that most of all.

“Are you OK?” I check.

He nods tightly. “Oh, yeah. Totally cool over here. Enjoying the view, actually.”

He looks me up and down. His grin could have been a leer if the look in his eyes weren’t so soft.

“So I can move?”
He affects a put-upon sigh. “Oh, I suppose so. Since you’ve gone to all this trouble, you might as well.”

Grinning, I copy his method from the time before. I watch as he bites his lip, holds his breath as I lift up, closes his eyes and huffs out through his nose as I slide back down.

He’d been right about this part, too. It’s nice. The burning has faded and when I lift and descend again I can focus on the force of his hard arousal massaging me as I move. I do it a third time, just to be sure and yes. Oh, yes. It’s very nice. It’s not particularly arousing, except for the idea of it, the knowledge that I’m having him. I’ve caught him. Deep inside me.

I rotate my hips and Duo’s neck arches. His biceps strain. He’s on the verge of tearing the pillow in half.

“Give me your hands,” I command.

It takes a moment for my words to make it past the lustful haze that darkens his eyes. When it does, he releases his grip on the underside of the pillow and stretches his arms toward me.

I curl my fingers around his wrists. Place his hands on my hips. “It doesn’t hurt. I want this. I’m ready.”

“Tro,” he breathes. “Stop me if I get carried away. Hit me if you have to.”

My pulse spikes. I see the same edge of madness in his eyes that had tormented me when I’d been buried inside him. I nod.

His hands rub over my hips. His fingers curl into my flesh. He flexes his hips and pulls me forward into the motion and—

Oh.

Oh, yes. Duo had been right about this, too. It’s good. It’s very good. I can feel him, his strength as he moves my body and the brute force of his cock surging inside me and—

I arch my back. He whines my name.

Duo. Keep going. Don’t stop. It’s good. It’s good. I like it—I want it—I need it.

Again, I’ve no idea if I say the words aloud. Again, it doesn’t matter. The result is the same.

I’m moving with him, panting softly, when his grip on me tightens and Duo shifts my hips slightly. To the right and then back and a bit to the left and—

Oh.

Duo. Oh. Ooh. It gets more intense. It becomes more than a deep, intimate massage of hard flesh against softer tissue. He’s pressing against me with every cresting motion—rubbing against my prostate—and heat explodes deep inside me, sweeping over me in ripples with every thrust and I can hear myself calling out, breathless, mindless—“Ah! Ah! Ah!”—and Duo’s muttering under his breath—“Tro! Holy! Fuck!”—and suddenly my cock demands my attention. It’s so hard and flushed and stinging with lust and I have to I-have-to-I-have-to—!

I scramble for the lubricant. Smear a bit on my palm. Wrap my slick hand around my length. Fuck my fist as Duo surges into me and I roll against him and—
I come so hard, so long, so intensely it hurts. It presses the air from my lungs. It makes my blood sting in my veins. It leaves my skin tingling from my toes all the way up to the hair follicles on my scalp.

With a gasp, I fall back into my own mind, my own body, and I open my eyes in time to watch Duo. Watch his back bow and feel his legs shift as he braces himself and his hips slam up into me over and over and over.

It doesn’t hurt. He’s unrestrained and fucking me and it doesn’t hurt at all. The sight, the feel, the knowledge combines in a spine-tingling trifecta that arouses me all over again in a warm flush that reaches my cock. Would have made me hard again if I hadn’t just spent myself completely.

Duo bites his lip as he pulls my hips down flush against him. My name rushes past his lips on deep, soft moan as our bodies roll like the ocean tide, ebbing as he comes. He comes and I watch and I want. I want him. I’ll want him for the remainder of my days.

He crashes down against the mattress and I grab for his hands, pressing his palms against my skin. It takes a few moments before his fingers twitch and he’s back in the here-and-now with me.

““I’m sorry,” he gasps out, his voice thin and scratchy. His throat raw from trying to hold back the sounds of his pleasure. “If I was rough, I’m real sorry, Tro.”

“Don’t be. You weren’t.”

He gives me an exhausted, crooked grin. “You say that now. We’ll see how you feel about it when we’re stuck in the comfort of economy class tomorrow.”

I suppose we will.

His fingertips ghost up my arms and he pulls me down toward him, uncaring of the semen that’s cooling on his skin and the lubricant that’s smearing between us. He holds me tightly, presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Are you OK?”

I laugh. I’m so far beyond OK that I think I’ve just been to the hereafter and back.

I think of tomorrow. Our early flight to Edinburgh. Duo’s going back to his family in the morning. There really is no turning back.

My jaw clenches shut against the agony.

I can’t leave him.

But I have to.

He’ll still have me, in a way. I’ll still stay with him in his nightmares. Guard him. Be with him. I’d promised him that and I’d meant it. I still mean it. I’ll always have his back there. That’s where he needs me, if he needs me at all. He doesn’t need me out here. Not in the real world. Duo’s strong enough to move on.

He and I—this was never going to last. All things come to an end. It had only been a matter of time.

I grab onto his shoulders and hold tight. I know he can feel the cooling tears that drip from the tip of my nose and onto his chest. He probably thinks he knows why I’m crying.

But he doesn’t.
“Good morning, Trowa.”

I answer Mara’s bright greeting with my usual nod. “Good morning.”

It’s been four days since Duo and I had stepped off the plane and found Ernest and Mara waiting to greet us in the airport arrivals lobby. I still haven’t been able to detect any threats in the vicinity. At the first available opportunity, after wishing the Franklins a good night on our first evening here, Duo and I had reconnoitered the neighborhood.

“In stealth mode,” I’d insisted.

There had been no resistance from him. No protest whatsoever. No reminder that we weren’t at war anymore. Duo had suited up in the dark clothes he’d brought with him and we’d gone over the entire immediate area. Following Ernest’s most recent call to the circus — knowing that forgiveness was finally within Duo’s reach — I’d anticipated the Franklins’ offer of hospitality. I’d gathered intel from electronic sources and, that first night in Edinburgh, Duo and I had checked that everything matched up. There hadn’t been any unpleasant surprises from that quarter.

When the Franklins had taken us sightseeing, it had given me and Duo the chance to scan the surrounding area for trouble. For all intents and purposes, Edinburgh is the peaceful, scenic city it’s touted to be.

Duo seems safe here. Safe enough that I’d encouraged him to take a day to be alone with Ernest.

Which leaves me here with Mara.

At least Duo’s cousins are away, busy with school and work during the week. I think the Franklins prefer that as well. After all, Duo and I are trained killers. I can understand why they might hesitate to include their children in this first true attempt at getting to know each other.

Mara asks, “Would you like some breakfast?”

“No, thank you.”

“The usual, then?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Shaking her head, she slides an empty coffee cup toward me and places a full coffee press on the table within reach. “Are you always this difficult to please?”

“Pretty much.”

She laughs. It’s a quiet sound. Soft. Domestic.

I pour myself a cup and take a sip.

Mara puts around the kitchen, wiping down the counter, turning on the dishwasher.

I ask, “What time did Ernest and Duo end up leaving for the lake?”

“Oh, half past five, I think.”
It must have been. I’d woken up biting back a scream at a quarter to seven. The nightmare — the worst one — had come again. I’d been pinned down and helpless. Waiting for the inevitable. And then the shots had come. Five shots. Five kills. I’d spat out the gag and grabbed for my trousers, scanning the area for him. He’d said he’d come for me. He’d promised.

But the building had been empty. An emptiness that I’d felt yawning wider and wider in my chest as I’d called for him. I’d called and called and called and called.

But he hadn’t come.

I tilt my face into the steam of the fresh coffee. This is better than what we have at the circus. I’m trying not to get used to it.

Mara volunteers, “They were quite the sight. Jesse insisted we take a photo.” She plucks it from under a magnet on the refrigerator door and places in front of me.

I glance down at Duo in a khaki fishing vest and a floppy hat. He’s grinning with an elbow propped up on Ernest’s shoulder as the older man poses with mock stoicism, net in hand. If I’d been there, Duo probably would have managed to wring a chuckle out of me. If he’d made an attempt. He might not have.

I stare at the Polaroid and think of the brief, painful discussion Duo and I had had just before bed.

Over dinner the night before, Ernest had suggested, “Let’s go out on the lake, Jesse. Have a talk about your dad. I’ve rented a boat for the morning.”

Duo’s gaze had immediately found mine. “Uh, that sounds great—”

I’d cut in before he could decline. “And you’ll have a great time.”

Duo hadn’t argued. Hadn’t asked me for a private word. Ernest had smiled and Duo had offered a fake version of the same expression.

Later, he’d cornered me as I’d washed up. Leaning in the doorway of the attached bathroom, he’d demanded, “Why? You said—you offered to take me fishing.”

“There are lots of different kinds of fishing. River. Ocean. We’ll still go,” I’d promised.

He’d sighed and crawled into bed. I’d joined him, wrapping an arm around him as usual, but I’d felt it: the distance between us. With every day here, it grows wider. The shoreline on which he stands slips further and further away.

Mara leans around the table, coming as close to me as she’s dared since our arrival, and regards the photograph. “They make quite the pair. But you’d better hope they don’t catch anything.”

At my inquiring look, she adds, “I can manage grumpy men, but fried-fish smell is another matter entirely.”

“Hm.” I feel my lips twitch with the first twinge of genuine amusement I’ve felt today. In the past two days. Maybe three. Probably more.

I tense automatically as, rather than heading out to garden or to run some errand, Mara takes a seat across from me.

I wait.
She continues, “Besides I’d much rather sit here and have a talk about Jesse than start that load of laundry.”

Ah. I hide briefly behind my coffee mug as I evaluate the situation. “What about Duo?”

Mara smiles, not seeming to mind that I continue to call her nephew by the name he’d given himself on the streets. “It’s clear how much you care for him,” she observes. “And I’ve tried to manage it myself, but it’s no good, Trowa.”

I don’t want to ask, but if I don’t this conversation may drag on even longer than it already has.

“What’s that?”

I brace myself for the on-coming speech. There’s a wide variety to choose from. All leading to the same conclusion: me being told to leave and not come back. Duo deserves the chance to be a civilian, to go to school, to meet a nice girl, to have a family, to be part of this family.

What she doesn’t know is that she’s already won the argument.

Mara declares, “I can’t make you smile the way your Duo can.”

Your Duo.

For a solid minute, I’m frozen. I don’t know what to say. With one sentence, she’s said so much.

Too much.

It’s true that I’m Duo’s, and Duo might be mine, but he isn’t Duo Maxwell anymore, is he? His name is Jesse Franklin. That’s his future.

“He belongs here,” I reply quietly. “With his family.”

Mara reaches across the table and lays a hand on my arm, preventing me from hiding behind the coffee cup again. “We have been here for fifteen years, not daring to hope that Kurt, Sylvia, or Jesse had somehow survived. We’ll be here a while longer yet. And we can wait to see him again because the person who really needs him right now isn’t Ernest. It’s you.”

I’m too raw and exhausted to manufacture a protest or a lie. Instead, I say, “I can manage. It’s you and Ernest who he needs right now.”

Mara hums a note of disagreement. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that if I were you.”

I’m starting to honestly despise the direction this conversation is taking. I should leave. I should go upstairs and pack my things and be gone before he gets back. I’ll call and apologize later.

But I know I won’t apologize. And I won’t call.

Duo will know where to find me. He’ll come see me when he has time.

Right. Just like that entire year after the war when he’d visited the circus exactly never.

This is ridiculous.

I’m pathetic.

It’s taking every ounce of my self-control to stick to the plan: help Duo. Just that. After everything
he’s done for me, I owe it to him to let him go when it’s time. It’s my own fault for letting myself want him. Need him.

I’ve never needed anyone in my entire life. A nobody like me doesn’t have that luxury. Needing someone means you depend on them. It means you can’t replace them. It means their absence rips a hole right through you. It means they’re a basic tenet of your happiness. The keystone of your foundation.

How could I have been so stupid? Letting myself need Duo Maxwell even as I’d known this day was coming. I had known that, one day, he’d be ready to strike out on his own. I’d even made arrangements to hasten it. I suppose I’d assumed I would be happy for him.

Maybe I am. Somewhere deep down.

Or maybe it’s already fallen out of me.

“Duo deserves to be happy,” I hear myself say in conclusion. I stand up.

“And you don’t?”

I move to the sink to dump out the coffee that my twisting stomach won’t let me finish. “I’m used to getting by.”

“Be careful, Trowa. In sacrificing your own happiness, you might just be denying your Duo what he needs.” I hear it when she stands and pushes her chair in. “Ernest and I cannot give him what you do. Before you act in his best interests, be sure you’re not just assuming you know what’s really important to him.”

Mara heads for the utility room. I wash my cup. Set it on a clean towel on the immaculate counter top to air dry. I leave the coffee press where it is. I’ve never washed one before. I might break it.

Eventually, something will break.

I’d told Duo I would make mistakes.

He’d promised to help me fix them.

I’m in love with him; I need him. He loves me; he needs a fresh start.

How can he help me fix this?

This is the best chance we have. To step back from each other. To put things in perspective. To break out of our habit of co-dependence.

Duo Maxwell—no, Jesse Franklin has a chance at a new life. Who wouldn’t want that? Who wouldn’t blossom with a family like Ernest and Mara to support them?

I think of the passports I’d had made. Our safety net.

What kind of life would that have been? Constantly on the run. An echo of our meaningless pasts. My meaningless past. I wouldn’t wish that on him. I won’t.

This place and these people are much better. I just have to convince him that staying here is for the best. I check my watch. I have ten hours before my flight. That should be plenty of time to come up with the right words. The words he needs to hear in order to finally become the man he’s meant to be.
As I pass by the kitchen table, my gaze slides toward the photo of Duo’s nonchalant lean against Ernest’s strong shoulder.

I’m not the one Duo is leaning on anymore.
“Well, I’m terribly sorry we didn’t catch anything, Jesse,” Ernest loudly bemoans as he holds open the kitchen door. He winks conspiratorially and I have to bite back a bark of laughter.

The first fish we’d caught had been a big one — or it had seemed so to me, anyway — but after netting it, removing the hook, and posing me with it for a photo, Ernest hadn’t put it in the cooler. He’d returned it to the lake and set it free.

“The hit to my fisherman’s pride I can live with. Your aunt’s attempts at a fry-up, not so much.”

Oh, boy. This dude is a riot.

I tell him, “Hey, that’s OK, man. It was still cool, y’know?”

“Hey, boys!” Mara greets, and then taking in our empty cooler and dejected expressions, guesses, “You didn’t catch anything?”

I look for it, but all I see is whole lotta fakery. Actually, she looks pretty damn thrilled by our woeful failure.

“Not a one,” Ernest sighs morosely. “I hope you had a Plan B for dinner, dear.”

“Oh… well, I might be able to come up with something,” she says, doing her damnedest to sound uncertain.

I just shake my head and make my exit. God help Ernest if I give the game away. Or Mara. I guess it could go either way. In any case, I’m not cutting in for this dance. Not that anyone would dance with me as I am now. I grimace at the stench of fish and lake water and insect repellent. Eugh. Hell, I wouldn’t dance with me.

Coming up on the door to the guest room, I knock before sticking my head in.

“Hey, Tro.”

He’s sitting on the bed, channel surfing on the small TV, which he quickly turns off. “Hey. How was fishing?”

“Fishing was, eh, OK,” I answer a little more loudly than strictly necessary. The door shuts behind me and my conspiratorial grin makes an appearance. “That’s the official story, anyway,” I confide as I approach our shared bed. I flop down on my back across the foot of it and chuckle up at the ceiling. “Remind me to tell you the unabridged version when Mara can’t possibly hear me.”
“Hm,” Trowa acknowledges.

I turn my head to look at him. “You were right. I had an awesome time. You would not believe the stuff I found out about my dad.” My grin widens. “Like, he was in the Glee Club in the military academy.”


I have to laugh at that for a second time. Those few words in Trowa’s voice, in that tone, just—it kills me dead. Once I manage to stop snorting, I add, “Yeah. And he used to have this pet ferret named Dinkledorf.”

“That’s a long name for a ferret.”

“A girl ferret, no less.”

“How devastating for her.”

“And there was this one time Kurt and Ernest went camping and they caught the tent on fire!” I try to relate the story to Trowa with gestures and sound effects in between bouts of laughter and insane cackling. Hell, I’m probably not even coherent, but I think I manage to get the gist of it across: a wrestling match over the last marshmallow gone horribly awry.

“And I was—laughing so—hard I—almost—dumped us—in the lake!”

I wheeze. Then I chuckle some more. And finally I decide to shut the hell up because it’s long past time for me to ask Trowa about his day.

Just as I draw a calming breath, the surface of the bed slants with Trowa’s weight as he moves to sit next to me.

“I’m glad you had fun.”

It’s weird how sincerely relieved he sounds.

“Hell, Tro. You didn’t think we’d, I dunno, get shipwrecked and have to drink our own urine as we waited for rescue or something?”

He snorts. “I was mildly concerned about the aggressive population of mosquitoes driving you to madness.”

I grin, lifting one side of my fishing vest and taking a whiff. “Whew, buddy. Ernest had me covered on that score.” I reach for Trowa’s hand. “So, when are you and me doing this fishing thing? Maybe not on a lake because, dude, you’re totally right about the mosquitoes. They were orbiting us like trawlers around mining satellites.” I shudder. “So,” I propose, “ocean fishing?”

Tro tilts his head to the side and considers me. “Can you swim?”

“Can I swim,” I repeat, indignant. “What kind of question is that?”

“The kind someone who’s planning on throwing you overboard would ask,” Trowa retorts.

Such a charmer, this one.

“Still having a tough time holding onto the mystery, eh?”
“No self discipline,” he agrees drolly.

“Ha! Now that’s funny.”

I smile up at him from my prone position. I just—are you supposed to love people more with every day that goes by? I know that’s what Kurt had written in his journal, but I’d thought it was just a turn of phrase or something. But it’s not. It’s really not. I pull myself upright and wrap my arms around Trowa’s shoulders.

“I missed sharing today with you.”

It hits me that this is the first day in months that Trowa and I haven’t spent within a few hundred yards of each other. Except for that week when I’d thought he was trying to figure out how to get rid of me. Hah. Like that would ever happen. The guy had totally used up his savings and maybe more than one favor of dubious legality to look out for me. The confidentiality agreement and those fake passports. He might as well have bought a ring as far as I’m concerned.

“I missed you, too,” Trowa says quietly before wrapping an arm around me in return. “There’ll be another time,” he promises.

Against Trowa’s neck, I nod my head and sigh. I like Trowa’s promises. His future facts.

“Ah, Duo?”

“Hm?”

“Were you planning on taking a shower before dinner?”

A broad grin stretches across my face. “Are you trying to tell me I’m not pleasantly aromatic?”

“You are,” Trowa begins, a strange emotion eking into his voice, “very aromatic.”

“Yeah, well,” I retort as I climb off of the bed, “if you had to choose between being a floating buffet or a little smelly...”

“A little smelly?”

“This coming from the guy who fantasizes about vacuuming up fish turds.”

“Yes. Vacuuming. Removing the stench.”

“Watch it, pal, or I’ll come over there and do something you won’t be able to unsmell for a week.”

“Please, no. I beg of you. Have mercy on those more fortunate than yourself.”

“More fortunate!” I squawk. Then I catch a whiff of myself. “OK, yeah. I’ll give you that one.”

Our eyes meet and the moment hangs between us for one heartbeat. Two. And then:

“Shower, stink-boy.”

“No respect,” I grumble, wrestling with a grin. “Absolutely no respect.”

“And wash your hair,” Trowa directs.

I lean an arm up on the door frame separating the bedroom from the adjoining bath. “What’s in it for
Trowa rolls his eyes. “My fragile sensibilities will be most appreciative.”

I laugh. “Well, why didn’t you just say so? I pride myself on taking good care of all my Trowas.”

“All of them?”

“Every single one is a satisfied customer.” I waggle my brows. “I haven’t heard any complaints so far.”

“You will if you don’t take full advantage of the amenities.”

“Amenities!” I crow, shrugging off the vest. “Look who’s got a word-of-the-day!”

He snorts a laugh, smiling and shaking his head. I love it when he laughs at my dumb one-liners. He’s gorgeous and I love him. Period.

Trowa looks amused as I stand on one foot and peel off a sock. I toss it on the vest and dive for the second one.

“Hey, you gonna gimme a hand with my hair or did you promise to help Mara whip up that dinner she’s trying so hard to act like she hadn’t already planned?”

“I’ll give you a hand.”

“Cool. Hey, we might need, like, some hazmat gear for these.” I swiggle out of my shirt. Add it to the growing mound of stench.

The corner of Trowa’s mouth twitches upward. “If there’s a flame-thrower in the garage, I call dibs.”

I cackle. “You can take the boy outta the Gundam, but you can’t take the fun of blowing shit up outta the boy.”

“You’re a bad influence on me.”

“You’re just now noticing this? But it’s cool. I’m still flattered, Tro.” The belt buckles clinks as I undo it. Trowa’s green eyes follow the motions of my fingers as I pop the top button on my trousers open, slide the zipper down, and then—

I reach for the door. “Too bad I’m too smelly for you, or you coulda seen how the story ends!”

I shut the door on his dark glower. Bhoo yeah. Someone’s already plotting retaliation and I am hella looking forward to it.

I’m just flat-out looking forward to kicking through this weird ass wall of whatever that’s sprung up between us here. Thankfully, it hadn’t seemed as thick just now, but I feel stupid for not being able to figure out what the deal is. And I don’t feel safe enough to ask him. The trailer is our place. The thought of waiting until we’re back there is enough to make my skin itch with impatience, but coming out and asking here might end up doing more harm than good.

I shower quickly. As I do, I make a decision. It’s time to head back to the circus. They’ll be arriving at the next location soon and facing the chaos of setting up the tents, hooking up the trailer utilities, convincing the generators to cooperate, calming the animals down, basic maintenance and repairs and restocking and—
Jesus. Working for a circus isn’t just a job. It’s a damn calling.

I wipe the steam off the mirror and catch myself smiling.

I run my hands over my face, checking for beard stubble. Eh. Shaving can wait.

Unfortunately, that means I’ve got zero excuses for not dealing with my hair. Such a joy. But, hell, if I cut it, I’d have to find myself an actual hobby to take up all my free time. So. There you go.

I squeeze out the water, systematically brush out the tangles, and then reach for the blow dryer. That’s the precise moment I realize that I hadn’t brought any clean clothes in here with me. Well, isn’t that just peachy.

“Looks like it’s just you and me, Fluffy,” I inform the towel that I wrap around my hips.

I crack open the door and peer into the bedroom just to be sure there aren’t any unpleasant surprises, but all looks status quo. Tro’s gone back to channel surfing. His shoulders are stiff and he’s punching the buttons on the remote like he’s launching antiaircraft missiles at White Fang mobile dolls. Hm. I’m sure there’s something I can do to cheer him up.

The bedroom door is closed. All systems are good to go.

“So, your honest opinion, on a scale of one to ten, how’s this look working for me?” I ask, modeling the towel, my hairbrush, and the disconnected blow dryer.

Trowa shuts off the TV again and leans back on an elbow, angling himself in my direction. He pauses. Stares.

Hm. Ladies and gentlemen, I think we have gawking. Not a bad start.

I slooowly walk over to the bed and cock a hip. “Hey, Tro,” I croon. “Looks like I’m all wet. Does that offer to gimme a hand still stand?”

“That’s not the only thing standing,” Trowa informs me as he eyes me up and down before giving Fluffy, the hip-hugging towel, a long look.

Ooh, I’ve earned myself a leer. This is turning out to be quite the event. I might even land myself the big one, folks.

I thrust the blow dryer into his hand and twirl the plug in front of his face. “Plug that in for me?” I wheedle softly. I could have been asking him to roll the condom on my cock. “Please?”

“Jesus, Duo,” he grumbles, a pained expression passing over his face. But he dutifully hunts up the nearest electrical outlet. By the time he’s done that, I’ve swiveled the nearby straight-back chair around and I’m straddling it. In the towel. Facing away from him.

He mutters a very naughty word.

“Trowa Barton,” I scold, smirking at him over my shoulder, “that sort of language is going to get you into trouble.”

“Promise?”

“Abso-damn-lutely.”

I hold up the top layers of my hair so Tro can get started. “Where’s the brush?” he asks.
I glance down guiltily. It’s lying on the surface of the drawn-taut towel, right between my thighs.
“Oh. Whoops.” Honestly, whoops. I hadn’t planned that one.

Trowa must follow my gaze right to where I’m looking because he sighs out that same naughty
word. He deftly plucks up the brush and then the blow dryer clicks on, ending all conversation.
Which is probably a good thing. I’ve pushed him just about as far as I dare without a guaranteed
follow-through on the horizon. I think wistfully of our bunk in the trailer and the unmarked box of
supplies tucked away in the second-to-last overhead cabinet.

Trowa works efficiently through each layer of hair until I’m holding up the last strands. My arms are
killing me, but that’s fine. It’s cool. I mean, given the last four days, I could use the muscle training.

When the dryer clicks off and Trowa starts braiding, I tell him, “It’s about time to head back, yeah?
They could use some help setting up.”

“Hm,” he agrees mildly. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“Yeah? Cool. I’ll call up the airline and book our tickets.”

There’s a long pause. Not that long pauses are unusual with Trowa Barton, but this one seems…
off.

“Edinburgh is a nice place,” he eventually remarks.

I shrug. “I suppose so.”

“Good school.”

“You thinkin’ about enrolling?”

He continues as if I hadn’t spoken, “Ernest and Mara seem like good people.”

Wait a minute. “Where’s this going, Tro?”

“You can be Jesse Franklin here.”

“And you can get a job at a pet store and be my sexy roommate-slash-boyfriend.”

“Duo. I’m serious.”

“So am I. We’ll even find you a shop that sells nifty, poisonous critters.”

For the first time, Trowa actually pulls on my hair. I whip around, my hand clamping over his
fingers as my temper flares. I glare up at him. He glares down at me.

“Your real name is Jesse Franklin and there are people here who care about you. Do you have any
idea how many war orphans would give anything to have what you’ve got?”

Oh, no. No. How can he say that. To me. I leap to my feet. “Yeah, I probably do. Do you want a
ballpark figure for the poor bastards in the colonies or here on Earth, too?”

“You owe it to your father to see where this leads.”

“The hell I do!”

“You owe it to yourself.”
“Fuck that. I like working at the circus—”

“You owe it to me.”

I open my mouth, but I can’t speak. The words are there, but I choke. I choke on them.

Trowa’s jaw clenches. I can only imagine the look on my face.

He says, “You owe it to me because I’ll never have anything like this and if I did I’d—”

“Don’t!” I hiss, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt. “Don’t tell me what you would do because you don’t know, OK? You won’t know until you’re in my shoes.”

“They’re not bad shoes to be in. Ernest and Mara—”

“Ernest and Mara have absolutely no idea how fucking terrified I am. How confusing all of this is. They don’t have a clue, Tro. And that’s why I asked you to come with me. That’s why I needed you to come with me. And I’m sorry about today. I’m sorry about all of it. I didn’t bring you here to shove all this in your face.”

“I know that.”

His agreement might sound like progress, but I strongly suspect it’s not. His next words prove me right.

“I came with you to watch your back. To make sure you’d be safe here.”

I snort. Given the fact that OZ had broadcast my photo all over the fucking Earth Sphere, that line is bullshit. “You can’t say after four measly days that I’ll be safe here. Try the hell again.”

“Four days is all I can stand, Duo!”

Jesus. That had almost been an actual shout.

He stops, draws in a deep breath, works on loosening his clenched fingers. “I need you,” he begins, “to try. A fresh start. University. A career. A life. Think about it. You’ll have every opportunity here.”

I shake my head, too furious to speak. If I open my mouth, I might just scream.

I take a deep breath. Then another. Finally, I cobble together another rebuttal. “Strike two. If this was about crossing the desert to the land of opportunity and praise-Jesus-sing-it-hallelujah, then why don’t you get in touch with Quatre and call in a favor?”

Trowa scans my face. “OK. You’re right. It’s not about safety or opportunity. It’s about a name. It’s about finding your destiny. It’s about looking after the people you need to protect. These are your people, Jesse.”

I rear back, nearly trip over the stupid chair. “Don’t. Don’t you call me that.”

He ignores me. “Don’t you want to find out who you are?”

“Jesus Christ, Tro. I know who the hell I am. I may not like it most of the time, but I do know. Put yourself in my place: would you suddenly become a different person if you were to find your family? Would you have to change just because a small, select group of people knows you by another name?” I gamble, giving him a glimpse of my greatest fear, “Would you want to go through that
Trowa leans in and presses a kiss to my forehead. Damn him, he knows what this does to me, how it cuts my legs out from under me every time because it makes me think of her: Sister Helen. It makes me remember that there’d been a time when I’d dared to hope. It reminds me of the lesson I’ve learned time and time again: it doesn’t matter what I want. It never has.

“You’re not alone. You never will be. You’re too damn charming,” Trowa tells me. Then he leans down and pulls his duffel bag out from under the bed. It’s full. He’d packed. Sonuvabitch.

“You’re leaving,” I blurt like a brainless twit.

“Yes.” He crosses the room to the door.

Lurching after him, I fume, “Because you think I belong here and you don’t.”

Trowa pauses in the act of opening the door and he looks over his shoulder. Scans my face with his gaze as if he doesn’t expect to ever see it again. He says quietly, “Because this is the way it has to be.”

And then he leaves. Walks out of the spare bedroom we’ve been sharing and out of the house.

I don’t even hear the front door open and shut behind him. I know I won’t no matter how hard I listen for it.

_Damn you, Trowa Barton._

How fucking dare he just walk away and leave me here wearing nothing but a God damn fluffy towel!

I don’t waste energy on screams or tears or cuss words.

I grab for my backpack. If Trowa Barton can save me from throwing my life away over a past that I can’t change, then he can damn well suck it up and just _deal_ with the fact that the two of us have a future.

Together.
So it took an embarrassingly large number of words to get to this point: we circle back around to the series -- lots of references in this chapter -- and hopefully arrive at a catharsis of sorts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

... TROWA ...

Doing the right thing isn’t supposed to feel this utterly, stomach-twistingly wretched. Is it?

I don’t know. Maybe it is. I’m not sure if I’ve ever done the right thing before. I’d killed the guys from my troupe who had sold out to the Alliance. I’d known them for as long as I could remember, and I’d killed them. I’d thought I was doing the right thing: guarding the captain. Just doing my job. He’d reprimanded me for it. For saving his life. I still don’t know what I should have done.

When Heero had hit the self-destruct button, I’d carried him away to safety. Either for burial or field first-aid. At the time, I hadn’t been sure which it would be. He’d lived. Reluctantly. That is, until he’d offered up his life in exchange for the ones he’d mistakenly taken. If Sylvia Noventa had pulled the trigger, if I’d just stood by and watched, would I have been doing the right thing?

Am I doing the right thing now?

Again, I have to admit that I just don’t know.

I think I am. I must be. Sending Duo off to a better life – that’s the only thing that makes sense.

I lean my head back against the seat and wait for my flight to begin boarding. It’s cool in the terminal. I have goose bumps beneath my sweater sleeves. I cross my arms, cross my legs.

Duo has been given forgiveness. He’s found absolution. He has his whole life ahead of him.

Hadin’t that been my goal from the start: to help Duo, to repay the favor of his steady and undemanding presence aboard Peace Mill/on and square the life debt I owed him from when he’d saved me, Miss Noin, and Quatre from that OZ patrol?

Yes. Of course it had.

But what had been my motivation?

I try to banish the question, try to cage it, box it, stuff it into any number of shadowy corners in my mind, but it circles back around. Relentless. Furious that I’ve been denying it for so long. Raging at me for letting him slip though my fingers.

I can’t think about this.
I can’t not think about this.

Luckily, that’s when general boarding is announced. Instructions, yes. I can form a line. Shuffle forward. Hand over my boarding pass. Find my seat. Stow my bag. I lean my head back against the headrest and close my eyes.

I keep them closed all through the pre-flight safety lecture, from takeoff to landing, even during the brief beverage service. If I keep them closed, I can pretend that this isn’t happening. I haven’t left Duo. I’d never convinced him to come back to the circus with me. I’d never kissed him. Never loved, wanted, and — most unforgivable of all — needed him.

I can erase the past three months if I just train myself to forget him.

It’s cold on the airplane, too.

There’s no one to meet me at the airport. Of course not. I hadn’t called Cathy to tell her I was on my way. Even if I had, she wouldn’t have gotten the message yet. Not until the caravan had stopped for the night and they’d hooked up the communications trailer to one of the generators. Plus however long it takes to convince the cantankerous thing to work right.

So I’m on my own. But that’s fine. I know where to go. I might be early, but it won’t be the first time I’ve spent the night outdoors under the stars.

I walk to the fairgrounds. It’s empty, but the gate is open: a sure sign that the groundskeeper is anticipating the circus’ arrival. I slip inside undetected. I’ve no desire to deal with the man’s questions. He knows me from the circus’ previous visits to this city, but he’ll hassle me about getting a room somewhere. With the mood I’m in, I might just kill him to save myself the aggravation.

I head for the sloping hillside that overlooks the metropolis beyond. It’s night. The lights are beautiful. They remind me of another night view just two weeks ago, a solid warmth against my body, cooling mugs of soup—

My chin twitches to the side, cutting off the recollection.

I might as well cut off my hands.

Maybe if I think of Duo Maxwell in the past tense. Dead.

Oh. No, no, no. That hurts worse. Spectacularly worse.

Transformed, then. He’s emerged from a chrysalis. He’s grown up and away. It’s just nature taking its course. It would have been impossible for me to hold onto him forever. So there’s no point in wondering if I could have. If he would have let me.

But I do. I wonder.

I sit forward, elbows on my knees and hands in my hair. The last time I’d been this conflicted, I’d been trembling on the cusp of repressed memories. Shivering with a coldness unlike anything the human mind can comprehend as I’d denied my own past, my own heart, my own self. As the memories had pushed forward, I’d clung to my limited, comfortable life and in doing so I’d been betraying my own soul.

Oh, God. Is that what I’ve done?

Is that why everything feels so cold? I tell myself that the air conditioning hadn’t been working right
in the taxi, at the airport, aboard the plane, inside the arrivals lobby. Southern Portugal is usually chilly at the beginning of May.

I tell myself the cold is a coincidence. I’m lying.

I’d promised not to lie to Duo, but I can lie to myself all I like.

One thing that is undeniably true, however, is the fact that Duo will have a better life, a better quality of life, with his family than he ever could with the circus. Just wait until winter sets in: the snow and wind and ice — freak storms hit no matter which equatorial country we settle in. Sudden cancellations due to recessions in the local economies or the fickle promises of politicians. Tobu’s periodic bouts of diarrhea. The manager’s mid-contract rants. And so much more.

So much that I’m going to have to face without him.

I lie back on the grass, crossing my arms over my chest to hold in the jolt of pain. To push back the chill. I can make out a few stars overhead, but they’re blurry.

It won’t take much to explain why I’d come back alone. Really, who could blame Duo for wanting to settle down in a stable, predictable, middle-class life? Cathy will probably suspect the truth. And she’ll probably slap me for it. But that’s fine. I can deal with that.

And the nightmares, I can manage those, too. Like I always have.

There’s really only one thing I can’t handle.

The temptation to summon a ghost of him is so strong I’m momentarily overwhelmed. I have enough memories to work from. More than enough. There’s no question that I need him badly enough to pull together an imaginary friend. What does it matter if I become one of those crazy, pathetic creatures that wander around in a daze, talking to people who aren’t there? It would be better than being alone.

But I know I won’t do it. The price is too high. No one would ever let me on the high wire or trapeze again. I’d be banned from visiting the cats. I’d be excluded from the knife-throwing routine. Eventually, there’d be nothing left for me to do here except oversee the generators and ask a Duo who isn’t there if he could pass me the oil can.

Bottom line: I’d have to give up the circus, the only home I have left.

Besides, Cathy would either have me committed or she’d hunt Duo down and haul him back here. I can’t bear the thought of either.

So I won’t think about it. It’ll be like it never was. Like it had never happened. Like I’d never felt —

“Hey, Tro. One question: do you love me?”

My eyes snap open and I drink in a vision of Duo silhouetted against the city lights.

Oh, fuck. It’s happening already. I’d thought it would take some effort at least before I could convince myself that he’s here, but it’s as easy as breathing.

I close my eyes. Why does this hallucination hurt? It’s not supposed to. I want it gone. Now.

I shiver. It’s so cold.
Maybe if I make my confession, he’ll go and I’ll finally be at peace.

No. Not peace. Never that. But I’ll be numb enough to go through the motions. Good enough.

My throat is dry. I have to push the words out one by one: “Do you remember when we crossed paths on Libra? I was on my way to help Quatre and you were taking off for Peace Million. You took out the enemy that was blocking the route and—”

I stop.

Why am I describing the moment in more detail? I’m only talking to myself. Putting off the truth.

“Do you remember what you were feeling—thinking—what you were thinking right then?”

I don’t wait for him to answer. He’ll only say something predictable. Figments of one’s imagination always do.

I say, “I remember. I remember I thought, ‘Take care, Duo.’ Take care because I—because you have to live through this. And I knew what it meant the moment I thought it. And then, you survived. I went back to the circus. Wondered if I’d hear from you. But the next time I saw you, you’d partnered up with Heero and I—”

This is so humiliating. But so necessary. This is how confession is supposed to go, isn’t it? Hide nothing. Let it go. Let all of the pain and fear and shame just go.

“I was jealous. That’s why I told you that I hadn’t been holding the shuttle for you. I lied when I said I wasn’t waiting for you. That whole year, I’d been waiting, and I’d only just realized it right then on that shuttle.”

I draw in a breath.

“I’m sorry, Duo. After everything you’d done for me — you found me at the circus, you saved our lives from the OZ patrol, you stayed with me – no questions or expectations – on Peace Million, you saved Cathy – you saved the whole circus – from the rogue OZ soldiers on C-241, you had my back against the first wave of mobile dolls — after all of that, those ungrateful words were the only thanks you got.”

I hesitate to open my eyes. When I do, his specter will be gone. I’m not ready.

“‘Take care, Duo.’ That was the real reason I had to find you. That wish, hope, feeling. I’d thought it was just a moment of madness in the heat of battle, but I was lying to myself. I’ve been in hundreds of battles. I knew better. I knew. That emotion—it was real. Months – years – went by, but it was still there. Always.”

I sigh.

“When I dreamed about you. It was the catalyst, but it wasn’t the motivation. Helping you, making sure someone had your back when you needed backup; that was just an excuse. And now this mess. I’m sorry.”

Tears are boiling out of my eyes, squeezing past my shut eyelids, sliding over my skin and chilling before they slip into the hair above my ears. I shiver again.

“‘Don’t go getting yourself killed.’”
I startle. Open my eyes without thinking of the repercussions. “What?”

Duo, hair messily braided, clothes rumpled, and bag bulging with haphazardly packed items, is still here. Kneeling next to me now. He leans closer, meets my gaze. I gawk, afraid to blink. If this is a mirage, an illusion, I no longer care. So I’ll be crazy. It’s fine. It’s wonderful so long as it means I can have one more moment with him.

“What I was thinking. Right then on Libra. I remember it because I—I sure as shit hadn’t—the other guys, I mean, they—I wanted them to make it through, yeah, but you were the one I needed to—you had to make it through.”

I don’t understand. How can he be saying these things? There’s no possible way this could be coming from my own mind. But it must be. It’s the only explanation because this – he – can’t be real.

I am now beyond pathetic. Telling myself what I desperately want to hear. Feeding the delusion. If I had any sense, I’d get up and walk into the forest. Just disappear.

I don’t move a muscle.

The vision moves closer and leans down until we’re nearly nose-to-nose. The feel of Duo’s warm breath against my skin, the scent of the Franklins’ shampoo, the slow tightening of Duo’s grip on his backpack strap – they all add up to one unbelievable conclusion: this is real.

Duo is really here.

I can’t remember how to breathe. How to think. How to… just how?

He gives me a crooked grin, but there’s no rage in his eyes. In the distant glow of the city lights, I see the sheen of tears. “So, yeah, I remember, Tro. Because I’d never felt anything like that before. Since the night I’d become Shinigami, nothing like that had ever made it through to—”

Duo’s eyes squeeze shut. His words lurch like escapees from between his gritted teeth: “I mean, I hung around with Heero and then J gives him that fucking self-destruct order, and then I let Quatre drag me through however many safe houses but he almost loses it completely thanks to Zero, and then Hilde offers me a place to stay and she nearly gets herself killed getting us that data on Libra and, one by one, everyone I came into contact with was—”

He pauses, panting for breath. “It was just more evidence that anyone who gets close to me ends up paying the ultimate price. And then you and I were passing each other on Libra, maybe for the last time, and it hit me—you had to live. That’s all I wanted. Not victory or peace. Just—you had to live. And I don’t know when or how it happened, but there you were, closer to me than anyone else had gotten.”

My chest hurts; my heart is pounding so hard.

“Don’t go getting yourself killed,” he repeats, bowing his head in a gesture of defeat except for the fact that his shoulders are tense. “I’d made a stupid mistake and let you close enough to be in danger – I’d painted a bull’s eye on you for the sick power that takes away everyone I care about or anyone who cares about me – and it made me angry enough to do what I had to do—get those old farts over to Peace Million.”

In the faint light of the distant city, I watch his lips twist into a sickening smirk. “One-way tickets are my specialty, y’know?”
Mine, too.

He breathes in, holds it, lets it out. “And then the battle was over. You were alive. All five of us. Even former-Lieutenant Noin, Sally, Hilde, Howard… and it felt like you’d dodged a bullet from a gun that I’d aimed right at you without you even knowing it.”

Duo shakes his head. “When Hilde offered me a job, I said yes—I ran away and hid in that salvage yard for a whole damn year. Then I invited myself along with Heero to handle Dekim Barton because, well, because I’m a selfish asshole, mostly. I wanted to lay some hurt on someone who deserved it. I still had so much rage and no one to punish with it. Heero and I—I’d push him until he pushed back and then I’d push harder and he’d come back swinging and—I figured that, after everything he’d been through, he could take it, or at least stay out of the line of fire.”

That whole year of silence and then him teaming up with Heero… Duo couldn’t possibly have been trying to protect me. I don’t believe it.

“We wrote the book on him, yeah?” I ask, scratching at the back of my neck. “So how do you explain—”

“Yes, Tro. I remember.” He chuckles. “I couldn’t seem to forget.”

“I am sorry. For what I said aboard the shuttle,” I whisper, afraid of shattering what we have between us. It’s strong enough to bring him here, but how easily will it break?

Duo sighs. “For a second, I thought… well—you don’t wanna know.” He stops, clears his throat. “That was a bad moment for me. But then I realized that it was better that way—better for you—if you really didn’t give a shit. So, it was kind of a relief. Because I’d never stopped feeling—needing you to be OK—and the reason why—it scared the hell outta me.”

“The God of Death? Scared?” I rasp in a pathetic attempt to tease a smile from him.

Duo turns and looks right at me, his expression completely shadowed. “No. I was scared, Tro. Just me. Just Duo Maxwell.”

Warm skin slides against mine. Fingers curl around the edge of my hand. Hold on tight.

My heart thrums. My chest compresses. I can’t—this is—all of this is just too much to—

I tense.

He pauses.

Then he tosses his pack on the grass next to my head and flops back, stretching out on the hillside beside me, his head on his makeshift pillow. He smiles up at the night sky, and then he turns, directing that precious joy right at me. My eyes have long since adjusted to the low level of illumination provided by the city, so I have no choice but to believe what I’m seeing.

But how can Duo be here, grinning at me with affection? I must have missed a step somewhere because there is no equation I know of which leads us from Duo’s shock and anger in the Franklins’ spare room to this beautiful, open expression on his face.

He informs me, “Cathy was right, y’know. You do need a kick in the pants.”

His fingers lace between mine, pressing our forearms together and locking our hands. His left. My right. But it doesn’t matter which is which: ambidexterity.
“What are you doing here?” I finally manage. My voice sounds rusty, mechanical. Had I been that close to turning into a robot boy again? “Ernest and Mara—”

“Wished me well, packed us a couple of sandwiches—” He frowns guilty. “—that I’ve probably just squished – whoops – and sent me on my way. But they made me promise that we’ll both come back in the summer to meet my cousins.”

What? We? I have the sudden and absolutely insane thought that Duo really does have a fish turd in his pocket.

“Yes, we, Trowa. You and I. We. I get why you did what you did, but it’s not cool. I get to have a say. And, damn it, so do you. Unless you really wanna be rid of me. Otherwise, you’re short-changing yourself and that’s just—no. Not gonna let you do that, either, buddy.”

I clear my throat and point out, “They’re your family. Absolution…”

“That is true. They are.” Duo admits, “And after I told them what I’d done, I had no idea if I’d ever be forgiven. You got me through that.”

I can’t listen to this. I can’t shut his words out. My chest hurts. Again. Still.

“And then when they showed up at the circus, there was a minute there when I thought they didn’t want me. And yeah, that hurt. But it wasn’t as bad as I was expecting. Because I had you. And I remembered that you’d told me you wanted me. And that was enough — that was gonna be enough to see me through. Just that: you want me.”

I don’t deny it. I can’t. I’d be lying if I did.

He forges onward, fording my silence, “When you found me on that fucking colony, I was real deep into hating myself for what I’d done to my—my dad and myself. I’d finally found someone to direct all those years of rage at: me. And then you were there and I hated myself for needing you. But then I figured out that you needed me, too, and that helped. It was like you’d flipped a switch inside me – I could stop trying to make myself suffer. The anger and guilt and, hell, all that shit. I got strong enough to start letting that go. The worst of it, anyway.”

I close my eyes.

“You want me. You need me. And that’s stronger—that’s a helluva lot stronger—than anything I can find anywhere else.”

But it’s not. I somehow find the strength to argue, “You could stay there. Go to school. Move on with your life.”

“Yeah. But there’s that old saying, ‘Home is where the heart is.’ Even you can’t argue with that one.”

No. Please. Not this.

Mercilessly, he reminds me, “We are a home, Tro. If we’re together, we’re home.”

I cover my face with my free hand. Tears swell and slip through my fingers.

Duo sighs heavily. “Heartless, cold, merciless,” I hear him say, repeating only a few of my past, and maybe preset, flaws. The same ones he’d so admired at the colony inn. “I forgot about ‘stubborn’.”
He shifts, rolling onto his side and pressing against me from shoulder to boots and, when it next comes, his voice is so close and his breath so warm that I know he’s murmuring into my ear. “Well, guess what, pal. So am I.”

I can’t remember why I’d walked away from him anymore.

I scrub my face. I lower my hand. Open my eyes. Turn my face toward him. He’s right where my ears had told me he’d be. He’s looking at me and he’s letting me see through all of his masks.

I do likewise. I roll onto my side, tugging our clasped hands up to the center of my chest. I hold on. I’m still bracing myself for the moment when he’ll pull away, but I’d promised not to lie to him. Whatever else I might break, I can’t break that vow.

“‘Yes,’” I answer on a hiccup. “‘Your question. The answer is ‘yes.’’”

He smiles. A smile just and only for me. There’s no mistaking the soft glow in his face. My breath catches.

He tells me, “Me, too.”

His other hand moves to my cheek, his fingertips gently brush through my tear-dampened hair. “So second question: what do you wanna do next?”

I want to kiss him. So that’s what I do. I nudge my lips against his, pet his lower lip with my tongue, nip and nibble until he’s smiling too widely to allow for more.

“As nice as that was,” Duo responds, “I didn’t mean for you to answer, like, literally.”

“Hm?”

He explains, “Be selfish for one minute and tell me what you want us to do next. Where you want to go. Together.”

I shake my head. Shrug one shoulder. I honestly don’t care.

Duo squints. Speculates. “What if I said I wanted to stay with the circus? With you.”

“OK.” I hadn’t lied when I’d told him that four days was my limit. The clock’s at zero. Time has run out. I can’t fight against myself anymore. I don’t want to. I never had in the first place.

I pull our joined hands up to my mouth and brush my lips across the calloused skin of Duo’s knuckles and fingertips. I shift my grip so that I can nuzzle his open palm. I stare at him through the city-light-illuminated darkness, noting the way Duo’s lips part in response, the way his breathing becomes slightly shallow and more rapid. I wrap my fingers around his wrist. Beneath my fingertips, I can feel Duo’s pulse beating just a little faster than normal. I lower Duo’s hand from my mouth and interlace our fingers.

“Can I really—can I have this?” I ask him.

“Your wish is my command,” he tells me with flashy sincerity. “What do you want?”

I mouth the dream that terrifies me more than any of the others, the one thing I haven’t dared to wish aloud for, the one thing I fear losing, the one thing I need: “You.”

Duo’s smile is dazzling. “You’ve got me, Tro. That’s a done deal.”
Pure happiness: it feels like sparkles dancing on the inside of your skin. I’d never known.

“You trust me?” he checks.

I nod, ripples of awareness opening up inside of me as I let go of the fear – Duo doesn’t lie. I let go of the pain – Duo loves me. I let go of the shame – Duo has my back. I let go of the regret – Duo wants us.

I breathe out, “I trust you.”

His hand tightens in mine. “You believe me?”

“I be—” My voice catches, trips over an unexpected sob. “I believe you.”

Duo’s fingertips caress the side of my neck before curling around my nape. “You have my trust, my belief, my respect.” He tilts his head against mine. Our noses brush. Mine is slick from tears. Duo doesn’t draw back. He settles in and tells me, “Now it’s your turn to lean on me for a while.”

I blink in silent, vague confusion.

“You helped me find my family,” Duo reminds me quietly, “and now I’ll help you find yours.”

I shake my head. I don’t want him to get his hopes up. “Duo, the odds of us finding any remaining members of my family are...”

But I don’t bother to do the math. Duo’s slow smile distracts me.

“Something tells me,” he muses aloud, “that you’re pretty good at beating the odds. Besides,” he continues with an enigmatic grin, “maybe they’ll find you.”

What? No. That is—

I wrack my brain, calling up my recollections of the area. The best places to hide. The best locations for defense.

My thoughts must be written right across my face because Duo chuckles, gently squeezing my fingers.

“I’ve got your back, Tro.”

I know he does. I let myself relax against him, suddenly understanding why Duo had asked me to meet the Franklins with him. Suddenly understanding a lot:

Finding my family won’t drive me further away from Duo. It won’t coax me away, either. No force in this universe could do that.

“I shouldn’t have left you in Edinburgh,” I tell him. “I’m sorry.”

He considers my expression for a long moment. I wait for the ultimatum. The scolding. The accusations. I’ve earned them all.

Duo says, “I need you.”

For a moment, the words don’t make any sense to my befuddled brain. And then... and then they do.
“Shh,” he breathes, nuzzling my wet cheeks. I’m crying again. Duo, the man I love and want and need, loves and wants and needs me, too.

I really can have this. I’ll make mistakes, but Duo will help me fix them. I trust him. I believe him. I believe in him.

I sidle closer to him until his head is resting on my shoulder and his knee is between mine. With him in my arms, I’m so warm. Southern Portugal is rather nice at the beginning of May. I look up at the night sky.

“You can’t see the stars,” I realize, tensing to shift over and give him a better vantage point.

His hand on my chest stops me. “I’ve got no complaints with this view.”

I wrap him up tighter in my embrace. Awed that he chooses me. He chooses me over the Franklins. Over an untainted and safely anonymous identity. Over everything on the Earth and in outer space.

About an hour later, I see the line of trucks and trailers approaching.

“Hey! Looks like we’ll get to sleep in our bed tonight,” Duo enthuses, looking up with a grin.

I just smile like an idiot. Really, there is nothing more I could or would ask for. Just this: Duo’s smile as he imagines lying down beside me in our bed.

Of course, it takes quite a bit of work to make it to that stage. It’s long after midnight by the time things are sorted out to the manager’s satisfaction. Cathy gives Duo a bone-crushing hug.

“I found the error of his ways,” Cathy insists and commences with smothering me.

I roll my eyes.

Duo chuckles. “Yeah, well, it wasn’t a one-way street. You can also thank him for not being a stubborn ass.”

I hold up a hand to forestall the hug that I know is coming. “Don’t. I was a stubborn ass, actually.”

“Who has finally seen the error of his ways,” Cathy insists and commences with smothering me.

I sigh and just let her.

The next evening, after the big top has been staked and lifted, after the trapeze and high wire have been set up and tested for safety, after every single chore on the day’s agenda has been seen to, Cathy looks at Duo across our table in the mess tent. She raises her brows in question and he nods.

She turns to me and says, “Trowa, there’s something I found in the communications trailer that I think you should see.”

Ten minutes later, as I sit in Cathy’s trailer and Duo’s hands rub my shoulders, I realize he’d been right; I don’t want to be alone when I face my family. Even if my family is someone I’ve known and cared about for years. I’m glad he’s right beside me for this.

“And just the other day,” Cathy, my sister, continues as I stare blankly at the photos and the blood test comparison report, “I found this.”

“What is it?” Duo asks for me.
“I’m pretty sure it’s the personnel profile that our parents filled out when they joined the circus.”

She’s smiling. Tears are spilling down her cheeks. I reach out and gently flick them away for her.

Duo stretches out a hand for the document. He holds it steady for me to read. If even one bit of this information is true, Cathy and I might be able to find out more about who our parents had been, where they’d come from, who had raised them, if there’s anyone still alive who remembers them.

Suddenly, it occurs to me that—

“You haven’t found your mother’s family,” I say to Duo.

He props his elbow on my shoulder and scratches the top of his head. “Actually, I already looked them up.”

“And?”

“Both my grandparents are alive.” At my look, he elaborates, “Archibald and Annie Sullivan. They live in Wales. I have three aunts, two are married with kids. Five cousins. One of which just had her first baby.”

“And?” Cathy prompts this time.

“I wrote to Archibald and Annie. Offered to do the familial blood test thing.” He shrugs. “Regardless,” he tells me and Cathy — but mostly me, “you won’t be getting rid of me.”

“I curl an arm around his waist.

He squeezes me back. Then he hands the file back to Cathy, saying, “You guys should take this to an Internet cafe tomorrow at lunch. I’ll cover for you for an extra hour. The manager is gonna love this idea I’ve got for a new routine. But it might take a little effort to convince him I can pull it off. I mean, I might mess it up the first couple of tries.” He winks.

“Cathy shakes her finger at him. “You magicians. You’re too sly for your own good. You’d better watch it.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” I readily volunteer.

Duo pretends to consider it. Then he looks into my eyes and smiles. “Yeah? OK. I can live with that.”

Yes, he can. We can. We will.

Chapter End Notes

The line from Trowa about missing a step (I must have missed a step somewhere because there is no equation I know of which leads us from Duo’s shock and anger in the Franklins’ spare room to this beautiful, open expression on his face.) is inspired by “Read the Signs” a giftfic to me by my good friend. Here it is: “Read the Signs” @ http://archiveofourown.org/works/6195901
An interesting series side note: Cathy calls Trowa stubborn when he (still suffering from amnesia) leaves the circus to fight again.

Also, I so did not do Magician!Duo justice. Actually, there are probably lots of aspects in this story that I could have explored in greater detail. If you, my dear fandom friend, are itching to write a thing -- anything -- you should definitely go for it!!

Next up: the epilogue.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

... QUATRE ...

“Duo?” I whisper, but my voice seems to echo loudly in the small room. I’m in an old farmhouse I’ve never seen before but somehow still recognize. I’m in a room that is inexplicably familiar as well, but what is truly disturbing is that I’m not remotely surprised by the sight before me.

It’s Duo.

And he’s...

I approach the rickety cot and reach out to touch the torn and stained black cloth that had once been a priest’s tunic. Duo does not stir. He’s unconscious.

“Duo?”

I say his name again, feeling some strange urgency to wake him, to know that he’s all right, that he’s just sleeping. I start to panic. I grasp his hand. His skin is cold. So cold. Cold like death. Is he even breathing?

I lean over him to check his pulse but a hand on my shoulder stops me. Although I hadn’t realized I wasn’t alone with Duo, I’m not startled. The warmth from that hand seeps into me, calming me, and I turn toward him. Somehow, I know who it is even before I see his face.

“What’s wrong with him, Trowa?” I ask.

Trowa doesn’t answer. He gently inserts his body between mine and Duo’s. I take a step back. Trowa will know what to do. I’m sure of it.

I watch as he gently unbuttons Duo’s black overshirt before smoothing his hands down Duo’s arms to tangle their fingers together. I stare as Trowa pulls Duo up from the bed. Seeing this, it looks as if Duo must weigh almost nothing as Trowa guides him to his feet. I marvel at this for a moment before I realize I’m staring at Duo’s nude form.

His eyes are now open but, with his hair down, he’s almost unrecognizable. There’s a contentment and openness about him I’d never seen before. And the way he looks into Trowa’s eyes...

I have to glance away, to give them a moment. I feel as if I’m intruding on something very intimate.

The only other thing in the room is the cot and I turn to study it with great interest. I gasp when I see it.

Duo is still there, still sleeping, still clothed in his battle-worn black, hair still braided. The corner of his priest’s collar is smudged with something that must be blood.

I don’t understand.

I glance at Trowa and Duo, standing together, then return my gaze to the fallen soldier lying so still
on the dusty mattress.

But then a gentle touch draws my attention away. Duo is smiling before me, his other hand still joined with Trowa’s. I don’t see any embarrassment in his eyes or in Trowa’s. Strangely, I’m not uncomfortable as Duo removes Trowa’s long-sleeved shirt and worn jeans. I find myself transfixed by the immeasurable trust they have for one another.

And then Duo leans forward and runs his hand over one of the many scars in Trowa’s flesh. His palm and then his fingers trail over the damaged skin. The scar remains, but with each pass of Duo’s hands, Trowa seems to gain more and more luminescence until he’s brimming with vitality.

He’s smiling. They are both smiling. Glowing with genuine joy.

Trowa wraps his arms around Duo’s waist and Duo turns, reaching toward the form upon the cot.

I shift my gaze in that direction and a thrill of fear spirals through me at the sight. It’s no longer Duo lying there, but it is. The creature’s lips curve into a sharp smile and its eyes are pools of black staring into the secrets of the universe. Shadows — no, shades glide over his exposed skin. These are the souls he has taken. Claimed.

This is Duo’s Shinigami.

Duo’s hand grasps the creature’s shoulder and I shout.

“No! Stop!”

But the being doesn’t attack. One moment, it’s human in form and the next it’s a long, black cloak lying on the cot. Duo picks it up. Unfurls it with a flick. Lays it over his own shoulders and then envelops Trowa beneath the mantle. The shades are still there, moving through the fabric. More now than before. Terran mobile suit battles and dead soldiers join a burning church and plague victims.

Trowa and Duo hold each other close. I can see their tears. With each that falls, the cloak pales. Brightens. And then glows.

I blink and take a step back as the fabric spreads wide – like wings – and an inhuman face rises above them. I look into its black eyes. What I at first think is a grin widens and tilts into a scythe. A scythe held in Duo’s hands. There’s a gleaming hunting knife in Trowa’s.

Shinigami begins to fade, laying a skeletal hand on each of their shoulders, but it doesn’t leave. I can still feel its presence.

Neither Duo nor Trowa seem to notice. Or if they do, it doesn’t bother them.

Trowa flips the knife in his grasp so that the blade is tucked along his forearm. Duo angles the blade of the scythe back over his shoulder. The two lovers reach for each other with an open hand. Their lips touch in a soft kiss.

That’s when I think I finally understand.

... QUATRE ...

“Quatre?”
Coming back to the moment with a visible startle, Quatre looks up and finds himself the recipient of an intent stare. “Sorry, Heero. What did you say?”

Setting his cup of coffee down in the patio table, Heero reaches for the chair next to Quatre’s and takes a seat. “Nothing. You looked far away, is all.”

“I apologize—”

“Is everyone in your family well?”

“Oh, yes. My sisters are fine.”

“And business is going smoothly?”

“As smoothly as it ever is,” Quatre promises with a chuckle. “Don’t trouble yourself, Heero. I’m the one with bad manners. Inviting all of you here and then letting my mind wander.”

“Hm.” Heero leans back in his chair and gives Quatre a long look. “You might consider talking about it. Get it off of your mind.”

“You’re right, but it’s ridiculous. I was just thinking about a dream I had recently,” he explains with a sheepish grin.

“About the war?”

“No, no. Something… different.”

Heero’s brows come together in a frown. “Dreams can be important. Don’t disregard what your mind is telling you.”

“Oh, it’s not—” Quatre breaks off at the sound of the terrace doors opening, admitting a figure bundled up in a pair of mittens, a down coat, and a thick scarf.

“Hey, guys,” he greets.

Quatre smiles. “Good evening, Duo. Have you eaten dinner?”

“Oh, yeah. Been there, done that. Those were some good eats, man. Thanks!”

“My pleasure. What are you up to?”

A grin of near-devilish glee curves his lips. “Quatre, just look at all that virgin snow, untouched by man or beast,” he says with a sweeping gesture to indicate the perfect whiteness beyond the edge of the terrace. Pale slopes glitter in the twilight.

“Yes, I see it,” Quatre assures him.

“Are you going to answer the question?” Heero demands.

Duo smirks at him. Quatre knows that smirk. So does Heero, apparently. Both brace themselves.

“Now why would I do a thing like that?” he replies before turning on his heel and approaching the edge of the sheltered patio.

Quatre opens his mouth in an attempt to forestall whatever Duo’s plans are, or at least ascertain if he requires backup, when the doors open for a second time, admitting Trowa and Wufei onto the
terrace.

“Duo?” Trowa quietly inquires, a full request for disclosure encapsulated in those two syllables.

Turning around completely, Duo drawls, “Yeees?”

“What are you doing?”

“You’ll see” is the cryptic reply.

Trowa glances at Quatre and Heero. Quatre shakes his head. Heero shrugs.

Trowa turns back around just in time to watch Duo open his arms wide and begin a slow fall backwards off of the stone railing into the sea of snow.

“Duo!” Quatre calls. “Wait!”

“Maxwell!” Wufei shouts. His Preventers training coming to the forefront, he dives for the edge of the veranda in an attempt to prevent the stunt. He arrives an instant too late, his fingers finding nothing but thin air where the front of Duo’s coat had just been.

Trowa reaches the edge of the patio next, followed by Quatre and a sigh-heaving Heero. All four watch as Duo falls backward and down... and down... disappearing beneath the surface of the snow completely.

For a moment, all is silent. And then Wufei calls, “Maxwell? Are you still alive?”

A soft noise bubbles up from the bottom of the snow pit. It grows in volume until Duo’s laughter is echoing in the picturesque valley.

Wufei looks away from the hole and informs Trowa, “He’s insane.”

Trowa just smiles.

Heero returns to his coffee.

Quatre sits down on the railing and leans over until he glimpses a scrap of fabric that might be Duo’s muffler.

“Guys!” Duo hollers. “Guys! This is awesome! Y’all have got to try this.”

Trowa leans over the edge to chuckle at Duo. “I dare you to say that thirty seconds from now.”

“What? Thirty seconds? Is this shit gonna self-destruct or something?”

“Or something,” Trowa retorts with a smirk.

Wufei’s scowl twitches into a look of understanding. It’s almost a smile. Then he shakes his head and, with a put-upon sigh, starts toward the house muttering, “I’ll fetch the ladder, then.”

Thank goodness it hadn’t been put away yet; Duo had only just placed the star on top of the Christmas tree that evening. Everyone had been free to decorate the lodge as they’d liked. Quatre finds it amusing that the sprig of mistletoe that had magically appeared in the living room archway had also mysteriously disappeared at some point later in the day. He suspects that Trowa had put it up. Wufei is the most likely candidate for having removed it. But it might have been Heero.
“It was supposed to be a snow angel,” Duo informs Trowa loud enough for the others to hear as well. “But I think I’ll call this one ‘Newbie Skier’s Demise.’”

“I like it,” Trowa replies, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning a hip against the railing.

“But somehow... I think it’s missing something, Tro.”

Trowa lifts a brow. “And what would that be? A Saint Bernard with a barrel of rum around his neck?”

Quatre chokes back a laugh. Through the glass doors, he can see Wufei approaching with the ladder hiked at a careful angle over his shoulder. Quatre moves toward the patio entrance to get the door.

“Um, no,” Duo replies. “I was thinking more along the lines of the newbie skier’s distraught boyfriend jumping in after him to make sure he’s OK.”

Trowa uncrosses his arms and braces his hands on his hips. “You want me to jump down there after you?” He huffs. “You just don’t want to be the only one Wufei glares at when he comes back with the ladder.”

“Actually,” Duo replies in a sober tone, “I think I just figured out the Thirty Second Rule. I’m starting to freeze my ass off down here—as well as other unmentionables—so, the way I see it, it’s in your best interest to try and warm me up.”

Trowa releases a martyred sigh and glares down into the hole for an instant before stepping off of the edge of the terrace with an acrobatic twirl to join him.

Quatre gasps, incredulous with shock.

“Barton!” Wufei shouts, just then coming through the open door with the extension ladder. “What the hell are you doing?! You’re going to miss the fireworks!”

“Somehow I don’t think they’ll mind,” Heero says with no small measure of sarcasm.

Wufei makes a sound in the back of his throat indicating how very much he does not appreciate the remark. He carries the ladder over to the hole and glances down. Apparently he also sees something objectionable because he shouts, “Maxwell! Barton! Ladder! Pay attention!”

Heero snorts and Quatre has to bite his own lip to keep from laughing.

Wufei maneuvers the ladder into the hole and jerks it in such a way that Quatre is positively certain that someone had just gotten smacked in the back of the head with a rung.

“Get a room!” Wufei bellows.

“We have a room,” Trowa points out calmly.

Wufei elaborates with a dark glare, “One that’s not next to mine!”

“The hell! Were you listening with your ear pressed to the damn wall?”

“We could try to be a little louder if you’re that keen,” Trowa drolly offers.

Quatre can’t help it; he laughs. He stumbles over to his seat at the table and giggles until he hiccups. Even Heero is smiling. Grudgingly, Wufei holds the ladder steady while Duo and Trowa ascend. Far from looking frozen, Duo is grinning widely and his eyes are sparkling with mirth.
“You know, Tro. Next year, I think we should bring a date for Wufei.”

Wufei glowers.

Trowa grins. “He does look a little... lonely.”

“Keiko or Miffy, ya think?”

“Miffy. Definitely Miffy.”

“Right. Grigori would end up dueling Wufei for Keiko’s honor and—actually, hold up. I like that better. Let’s bring Keiko.”

Trowa nods solemnly. “And a reliable video camera.”

“Ooh! We can sell tickets, T-shirts, pay-per-view!” Duo grandstands.

Wufei informs them in his best Preventer tone, “You — the both of you — are one syllable away from getting dumped back in that hole and left there overnight.”

Taking in the feral gleam in Wufei’s dark eyes, Duo restrains his laughter with an effort and nods, holding his snow-crusted, mittened hands up in surrender.

“Duo?” Quatre inquires, frankly astonished by the ready capitulation. “You’re just going to let Wufei win this round?”

“Yeah,” Duo sighs out, eyes still shining with mirth, “I didn’t get him a Christmas present, so...”

Before Wufei can do more than roll his eyes, Trowa points out, “Duo, the snow’s melting through your jeans.”

“I highly doubt that’s only snow,” Wufei mutters darkly.

Quatre claps a hand over his mouth.

Heero snorts.

Duo and Trowa glance at Wufei in mild surprise. Then Duo snickers. “Uh, um, yeah. We weren’t down there that long and before you slander our respective endurances need I remind you that we were both Gundam pilots?”

“And?” Wufei challenges, unimpressed.

Duo opens his mouth to retort but Trowa nudges his shoulder just in time. “Come on, Duo. Let’s get changed and then you can rip into him.”

“Grr,” Duo says, heading for the terrace doors with Trowa in tow. “I hate snow.”

As soon as the doors shut behind them, Wufei, Heero, and Quatre burst into laughter. Wiping tears from the corners of his eyes, Wufei lowers himself into a third chair.

“Oh, wow,” Quatre muses, winding down. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen either of them like that before.”

“Like what?” Heero deadpans. “Walking hormones?”
Wufei snorts at that before becoming serious. “They have been good for each other.”

Quatre agrees. “Trowa smiles now and Duo...” His voice trails off as he tries to articulate the change he’s witnessed in Duo over the last two days of their holiday gathering. The table grows silent as all three contemplate Duo’s honest laughter, good-natured arguing, and the genuine warmth in his smile. So different from the hard edges and fatalistic cynicism churning just beneath his eager grin during the war. Why, the look in his eyes whenever he catches Trowa’s gaze is certainly—

Quatre’s eyes widen. That look! He knows that look.

“It’s Duo’s Shinigami,” he says suddenly, quietly, drawing Heero’s attention from the contents of his coffee cup and Wufei’s from the darkening night sky overhead.

Quatre glances from one former comrade to the other, remembering his dream of the battered soldier lying as still as death. He remembers Trowa pulling Duo back into the realm of the living; Duo instilling Trowa with strength and happiness; the cloak made black with pain and death; the tears that had cleansed the fabric; the weapons held carefully in their hands as the specter watches over them in silence, as if patiently awaiting its next summoning.

“What of Maxwell’s demons? Or Barton’s past, for that matter?” Wufei frowns, unimpressed by Quatre’s waxing epiphany. “It shouldn’t be surprise that their joint efforts have persevered. Maxwell and Barton were always more than capable of working well with a partner.”

He glances at Heero, who concedes, “A quality the both of us lacked, yes.”

“One that you didn’t require for the sake of balance,” Quatre corrects.

Heero hums. Wufei blinks. Quatre doesn’t need to remind them of Duo’s near-frantic and, at times, suicidal daring; his fearless compulsion to take on the entirety of the enemy’s forces all on his own and to hell with the consequences. Likewise, no one speaks of Trowa’s apathy regarding his own safety or blatant indifference toward death.

Duo had dared death to come for him. Trowa had invited it with a proverbial shrug.

Passion and dispassion. Without a counterweight, either can be — and could have been — fatal.

“They’ve found equilibrium, you mean?” Wufei summarizes.

Heero exhales a brief chuckle. “A force to be reckoned with.”

“Allah help us if they ever decide to take over the world.”

Wufei scowls at Quatre. “That is not amusing.”

Heero laughs. Loud enough to echo. Perhaps even cause an avalanche on a distant peak.

Wufei crosses his arms over his chest. Quatre quirks a brow.

“May their demons rest,” Heero obligingly explains after finally winding down. Still smiling, he lifts his coffee cup in a toast to his friends and the future, “For the sake of Earth Sphere United Nation and our peace of mind, may demons rest.”

The End
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for sticking with this monster of a story. I hope you enjoyed it! I would be thrilled to get a KUDO from you, and I will fangirl all over the place with happiness if you'd like to share your thoughts in a comment!! (^_^)

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